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## "STRANGE ORCHIDS"

a goose-flesh story of weird happenings, lovely girls, and gorgeous flowers.
By DOROTHY QUICK

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G. G. Pendarves
Earl Peirce, Jr.
Robert Bloch
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MARCH, 1937

WEIRD TALES

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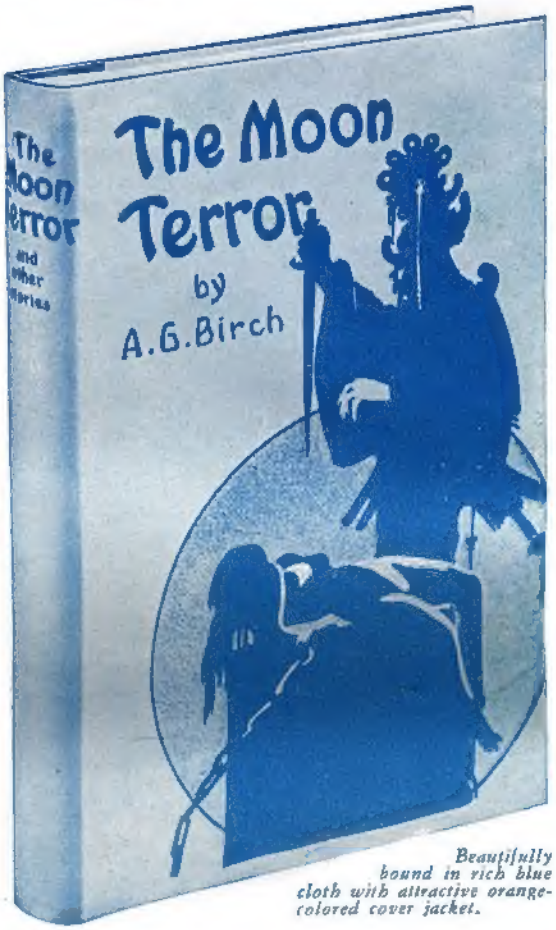


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# Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# Strange Orchids

By DOROTHY QUICK

*A goose-flesh story of the weird and tragic fate that befell eighteen lovely girls—a gripping tale of strange happenings, and gorgeous flowers*

IF I HAD not gone to Muriel's party, I wouldn't have met Angus O'Malley and I would have been spared the horror and despair of the tragic events in which the strange orchids played so terrible a part.

Often as I look at my white hair—the legacy that those happenings left me—I wonder if my life would have been happier had I followed my first impulse and remained away from Muriel's. But almost instantly the question is answered for me and I know that despite the white hair—despite the horror that put it there—I am glad I went to Muriel's.

For even if I did meet Angus O'Malley that night, I also met Rex Stanton, and if the one brought me terror beyond comprehension the other brought me such joy that it overbalanced everything else. And the very fact that neither Rex nor I can quite forget the things that happened has only served to bring us closer together.

The reason I hesitated about going to Muriel's was that one never knew whom one would meet at her studio. I'm not a snob, but I do dislike being thrown into close contact with a gangster or the leading female impersonater who talks with a lisp and rouges his cheeks. I had on previous occasions been introduced to both at Muriel's. On the other hand, there were rumors that Splondowski would be at the party with his violin, and it was because of Splondowski that I finally went. I couldn't resist hearing him play even though I had to sit next to Public Enemy Number 1 to do it.

It was while I sat listening to the magic notes of Splondowski that I saw Angus O'Malley for the first time.

He was standing near the door when I happened to look up. His eyes caught mine and held them with strange magnetism. I felt as though they were stripping my body bare of the Paris gown I was so proud of—as though I must snatch something to cover myself with, even though I knew I was perfectly clothed. The impulse was almost overpowering, but much as I wanted to give in to it, I couldn't. His eyes, deep black like a mysterious unfathomed pool, would not have let me. I sat staring into them as though I had been a bird fascinated by a snake.

Then an even worse thing happened. I felt as though he had exhausted the possibilities of my body, that now that he knew every line I possessed he must probe still further. With a kind of mental anguish I felt him probing my soul, until eventually he knew that, too. Then he released my eyes and I was completely myself again.

At the same time I realized that Splondowski had played at the most only four bars of music, although it seemed ages ago that I had first looked up at the handsome stranger. I told myself I was a fool with an over-active imagination. The music got me all stirred up and I began feeling things, I thought, and out

of the corner of my eye stole another glance at the man who had produced such an extraordinary effect upon me. He was very tall and very slim, with thick black hair that waved back from a rather low forehead. He wore it longer than most men, and there was a suspicion of curl at the end which gave him a Byronic look. His eyes were, as I have said, black under heavy brows and lids. His nose was fine, chiseled Greek, as were the lines of his face. His mouth was well cut, but easily the most sensuous I have ever seen. Was it this that had made me imagine things? If so, I'd better consult a psychiatrist immediately. Nice, well-brought-up girls of twenty shouldn't have such thoughts of their own volition. I'd never had them before, but I'd never seen anyone like Angus O'Malley, either. I noticed that his skin was very white, extraordinarily fine in texture for a man, and his hands were slender—the hands of an artist or a dreamer. I wondered who he was, and then remembered how I had felt looking

**"The small voice whispered again, 'Danger! Danger!' and the orchid petals touched her cheek gently, pityingly."**

into his eyes and decided I didn't want to know.

A FEW minutes later Splondowski had finished playing and Muriel came up to me, the man I didn't want to know beside her.

"Mr. O'Malley wants to be presented," Muriel said as if Mr. O'Malley were the King of England conferring a favor.

Muriel made the necessary remarks, "Louise Howard, Angus O'Malley," and rushed away.

Angus O'Malley extended his hand. Reluctantly I put mine into it. He bent low over my fingers and touched them with his lips. It was as though a flame had brushed across my hand.

"You are lovely," he said, and his voice was deep and beautiful. "There is nothing unusual about you, but nevertheless you are lovely."

It was an odd compliment, especially as he said it rather regretfully.

I drew my hand away.

"Do you like unusual things?" I asked. I somehow wanted to be impersonal with this man.

"It is only the unusual that gives zest to life. See." He touched his coat lapel, and for the first time I noticed that it contained, instead of the carnation that from a distance I had credited him with wearing, a single lavender orchid. It was an exquisite flower, a very pale shade with a purple heart. Even as I admired it I thought what an odd thing it was for a man to wear in his buttonhole.

O'Malley continued speaking almost as though he guessed my thought. "I wear orchids because they are not commonplace. I wear unusual ones when I can; otherwise I content myself with the better known varieties. Just now I have nothing worth exhibiting, but some day I shall show you my orchids."

He took it for granted that I would want to see them, which I emphatically did not.

"That flower seems exquisite to me," I said.

"It gives me nothing," he shrugged. "Still, it will do until another blooms."

There was the anticipation of a true collector in his eyes for a few seconds; then it died away as they concentrated on me.

"But we waste time talking of something that does not interest you. Besides, I want to tell you that I am attracted to you. I have looked upon you and searched your inmost thoughts, and you please me."

Again the king-like touch—Louis XIV condescending to a peasant; more than that, for it came to me that he was expressing in actual fact the feelings I had had while Splondowski played. A panic swept over me. I wanted to run away.

He leaned toward me. "Look at me," he commanded.

I was afraid. I didn't dare meet his gaze again. I looked about the room, hoping to catch the eye of someone I knew. Everyone I could have signaled was looking the other way. Then, out of a mass of unfamiliar faces, one looked into mine—a kindly, straightforward face, bronzed skin, steady blue eyes and brown hair, and a humorous mouth that was both firm and tender. His tall, well-knit, muscular body stood out above the others by sheer force of personality. I smiled in his direction, hoping my need for his help would somehow or other miraculously be conveyed to him.

"Look at me," O'Malley's voice was in my ear and it seemed to be weaving a spell around me. I knew in another minute or two I should meet his eyes, and I was afraid—afraid of what might happen when I did.

Just then the miracle happened—a new voice broke the tension between us

—a gay, cheerful voice that was like a mountain stream running over stones, crystal clear. "I'm *so* glad to see you again."

I looked up into the blue eyes of the young man to whom I had sent the S. O. S. and was able to forget the deep black ones I was so anxious to evade.

"I'm glad to see you." I gave him both my hands.

I think it was at that instant I fell in love with Rex Stanton, and he swears that when he took my hands and felt them tremble in his he knew I was the girl he wanted to marry. I didn't know then, but my subconscious self must have, for it was an electric moment.

Angus O'Malley broke into it. "Will you not present me to your friend?" There was a depth and malice in his voice that made me realize I didn't know the name of my rescuer.

He saved me again. "Surely you remember me, Rex Stanton, Mr. O'Malley. I've had the pleasure of meeting you before."

O'Malley's full lips curved oddly. "My memory is, for once, at fault."

"Well, not being an unusual type, I'm afraid I'm easy to forget." Rex Stanton smiled charmingly.

That word again—*unusual*. It seemed odd that both men should emphasize the word.

O'MALLEY ignored Rex and turned to me. Taking my hand, he bent over it. Once more I felt the touch of his hot lips and experienced the same sensations. As he straightened up he whispered in my ear, "A captive bird may beat its wings against the net, but it is of no avail." Then louder, "I shall give myself the pleasure of calling upon you tomorrow." And without a word to Rex he was gone.

I began to shake with convulsive tremors that I couldn't control.

Rex Stanton put his arm around me. "He's a strange person, but he's not quite as bad as all that. You did want me to come over, didn't you?"

I leaned against him, and nodded. Almost before I knew it he had piloted me out through the crowd into a quiet corner of Muriel's library, which fortunately was entirely deserted. Then almost without my own volition I was telling him all about everything, even my imagined feelings while Splondowski played.

By the time I'd reached the end of my recital I was calm again.

Rex looked grave. "The man seems slightly goofy to me," he commented. "Of course I'd never met him before, but luckily I had inquired who he was. He rather stands out in an assemblage—with his orchid boutonnière! Oh well, I guess he's safe enough—probably just a little touched. Still I'd like to be there tomorrow when he calls."

"Will you?" I cried. Already I was sure that if Rex was on hand nothing could go wrong.

"If you want me, I'll come early and stay late. That's a bargain and my good luck."

We shook hands. Then he said, "You're not one of Muriel's types?"

"We went to school together. I came to hear Splondowski. Why did you come? You're not her type, either."

He grinned. "*Touché*. I knew her first husband. I came because, frankly, I knew she accumulated odd people, and I'm investigating the disappearance of Lucia Trent."

"I knew Lucia." I felt suddenly saddened as I remembered her bright beauty. Lucia had golden hair of the color that is formed in the water-lily's heart, brown eyes with tiny yellow flecks in them, a

tawny skin the shade of honey and a body full of slim curves that were lovely to behold. She was only seventeen when she walked out of her house to go and see her best friend. Her mother had waved good-bye to her laughingly and sent messages, but they had never been delivered, for Lucia had vanished as completely and utterly as though she had never existed. No one ever saw her again. It was a terrific mystery, and it had brought sorrow to us all.

"You're just the person for me, then." Rex brought me back into the present. "Tell me, was there anything"—he started to say "unusual", then in the light of my recent confession changed it to—"*different* about her?"

"Do you think it could have been white-slavers?" I advanced the most popular theory.

"I wonder. Was there any particular man?"

"At least fifteen boys. Lucia was popular. But none of them knew anything. They all adored her—everyone did—but she hadn't any secret passion, if that's what you mean." I was almost caustic. It seemed so silly to associate Lucia with intrigue.

"I only asked. One has to cover every contingency, you know."

"How did you——" I began.

He cut me short. "I was coming to that. Your friend Lucia isn't the first girl to disappear completely with no trace."

"You mean Dorothy Arnold?" Everyone had been comparing the two cases.

"That's ancient history. I mean in the last year. Outstanding disappearances. In this city, of course, there are always a number of missing girls, but there is generally some kind of a lead. Too, the girls are usually from the lower classes, especially girls without anyone to be interested in what becomes of them. These disappearances I've been investigating haven't been like that. They've all been girls like Lucia, young, beautiful and intelligent and from good families, which doesn't interest white-slavers ordinarily. After about eight such disappearances the coincidence struck the police. Eventually I was called in from Washington."

A G-man! No wonder I had felt confidence in him.

He went on. "There have been sixteen cases—no, your friend was the seventeenth. Seventeen girls snatched into thin air—gone without a trace. They've all left their homes for some normal reason and not one of them has been seen again. God help me, I haven't been able to find a single clue. I've been clutching at straws. That's why I came here tonight—a futile gamble, but it brought me something very wonderful."

"What?" I asked point-blank because I had to know.

When he answered, "You," I was content.

THE next afternoon Angus O'Malley came to find Rex and me chatting cozily over the tea-table. He remained to join in the talk. It was all very commonplace. I began to think I had dreamed the night before, until once he caught my eyes and held them and it seemed to me that a message came from his brain to mine. "Flutter your wings if you like, but remember only I can open the net." Then there came into my vision the lavender edges of the orchid he was wearing. A slight movement of the petals drew my eyes away from him.

He hadn't touched my hand in greeting, and he did not do so in farewell, but just as he took his departure he said, "I shall come again. In a few days my new orchid will bloom, and I want you to see it." There was a touch of malice as he bowed slightly toward Rex—"Perhaps

the good Mr. Stanton will be here too."

"I *would* like to see the orchid." Rex ignored the malice.

"Unfortunately I can set no date. My flowers are capricious, but when it blooms I will come."

Another bow, this time in my direction, and he was gone. From the other side of the front door we heard something that from anyone else would have been a chuckle but from Angus O'Malley seemed sinister.

Rex said, "We're all washed up about that man. Except for the orchid and his Oscar Wildish appearance he's all right."

"Except for the orchid." If Rex had only known—if I had only guessed—but we didn't. I said, "I hope you're here when he comes." And when Rex began to tell me how much he wanted to be, I dismissed Angus O'Malley from my mind.

THREE days later I was sitting out under the trees with a book Rex had sent me when suddenly a shadow fell upon it. I looked up and there was Angus O'Malley smiling down upon me. In his buttonhole was the most exquisite orchid I had ever seen. Its petals were the yellow color of honey and its heart was deep brown with little golden flecks.

"Oh!" I exclaimed, forgetting my fear of him in my admiration of the orchid. "I have never seen an orchid like that."

He knew what I meant. "You never will again—unless I am so fortunate as to find—the same colors—once more. See," he took it from his coat and held it out to me, "I have brought it for you. Will you wear it?"

I touched the flower, and one of the petals curled around my finger as though it had been a living thing.

"May I pin it on?" he asked, and before I could either assent or refuse he was fastening the great golden flower on my dress near my shoulder, where the petals brushed against my cheek. "Speak to her, my flower," he whispered; "tell her the things I have told you to tell her. Sing to her of my love in the daytime and at night tell her of the joys to be found in my arms."

I shrank back. He caught my hands in his. "You are not beautiful, your hair has no vivid color, but you can be a companion with whom to share my secrets, someone to know and understand my work. I would see that you understand. Surely I who thought never to know love have been pierced by the arrow of the blind god. Give yourself to me."

All this time he had been pulling me closer until now I was in his arms and his full lips were near mine.

"No, no!" I tried to push him away.

"Then will you marry me?" he laughed wildly. "Yes, I, Angus O'Malley, chosen of the gods, I who can make and unmake souls, ask you to be my wife."

I shook my head. I could not command my voice.

His lips crushed mine. At first I thought I would die of sheer repugnance, and then my will seemed caught up into his—the repugnance went away and in its stead came response to his kisses.

Suddenly the orchid petals brushed against my cheek and a small stifled voice whispered in my ear. "Send him away. Send him away. Danger! Danger!" The small voice went on and on, growing stronger as it seeped into my consciousness. "Send him away. Danger! Danger!"

The voice seemed vaguely familiar, yet I could not place it, but it brought me back to my senses. With enormous effort I twisted from his arms and wiped his kisses from my lips with the back of my hand.

"Go—please go. I never want to see you again!" I cried.

His eyes narrowed. "Yet you responded to my kisses."

The still small voice was silent now. I must have imagined it. I told myself sternly that flowers couldn't speak. But I remembered how I had returned his kiss, and a wave of shame swept over me until my cheeks burned.

"You are afraid. The little white dove trembling before the eagle. But the eagle can be kind—to his mate. Do not tempt me to be otherwise—for if you do——" His voice died away without putting his thoughts into words; yet I understood that he was threatening me.

And then like the sunlight breaking through thunder clouds came Rex Stanton's voice: "Louise. Louise. Where are you?"

"Down by the willows," I called.

"The guardian angel," O'Malley sneered, then bent down close to me. "I am going away, but I will come back, and when I do, you must make up your mind which it is to be, love or hate—and I warn you I can hate even better than I can love."

The small voice whispered again, "Danger! Danger!" and the orchid petals touched my cheek, gently, pityingly.

"My flower will tell you of my love," O'Malley said, and then he strode off across the lawn past Rex, who had just come into sight.

"Wow!" Rex exclaimed; "not even a greeting did I get. I felt as though a storm cloud sailed by. I take it that all is not serene on the horizon."

Once more I unburdened my mind of everything that had happened.

Rex made no comment until I had finished; then he said, "You can't marry O'Malley, because you're going to marry me."

He held out his hand. I put mine into it, and that was that. We didn't speak of love; it wasn't necessary. He didn't kiss me then. But the look in his eyes was a caress and we were both happy with the deep contentment of perfect love. It was a wonderful moment between us.

Rex broke the spell. "Let me see the orchid. It's different in color from any I've ever seen."

With unsteady fingers I unfastened it and put it in his hands, and as I did so it seemed to me I heard a sigh.

Rex heard it too. He looked at me sharply. "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy," he quoted. "Perhaps we're up against magic."

I laughed, but my laugh died away as quickly as a sudden breeze on a still day, for the flower in Rex's hand bent over as though it were nodding—and there was no wind!

I shivered. "Rex, I'm afraid."

"If the flower has life, a strange life of some kind we don't understand, at least it is your friend," Rex said calmly. "It warns you of danger. It confirms my suspicion that we're up against something incomprehensible."

"He said he would make me understand — perhaps that's what he meant——"

Then suddenly something Rex had said beat itself into my brain: "Your friend." I looked down at the flower—saw the lovely golden-honey color, the deep brown heart with yellow flecks——

"Lucia! Lucia Trent!" I exclaimed. "The orchid—it's like Lucia—the same coloring!"

I stopped aghast at my own thought—but once more the flower bowed as though in assent and swayed toward me as though it wanted to touch me.

"Good heaven!" Rex stared at the flower. "You're sure?"

"She had those same golden flecks in her brown eyes."

"There might be a connection, but what? What?"

"I saw a movie in which a scientist reduced people to dolls. Then he hypnotized them into doing whatever he wanted —sent them forth to slay." Lionel Barrymore's acting was still vivid before me.

"My God! Perhaps——" Rex stared at the orchid.

The flower swayed back and forth as though it were trying to say no.

"The orchid—whatever—whoever—it is, is my friend," I said solemnly, and the flower nodded. "It's uncanny—it knows what we say."

"It's against all the laws of nature," Rex protested.

"It may only be a law we don't understand. O'Malley said the orchid would tell me of his love. He may have given it power to say what he wanted it to."

"And because Lucia was your friend the flower spoke of its own accord."

The orchid bent over again. We knew it meant yes, and we were silent before a marvel we couldn't comprehend.

Finally Rex spoke. "What do you know about O'Malley?"

"Nothing that I haven't told you."

"Muriel said he bought a magnificent old place at Riverdale-on-Hudson about two years ago and installed wonderful orchid houses. He drives a Rolls-Royce and has a yacht. He sometimes takes people on cruises, often has parties at his estate. Could you find out if Lucia knew him?"

"I could ask her mother."

"Do—and I'll try to get more of a line on him. Find out if there's any connection with any of the other girls. Of course it's utterly fantastic, and I can't for the life of me think Lucia's soul is imprisoned in that flower. Still, it's the only lead I've had, and I told you I was clutching at straws."

Rex gave back the orchid to me and once more I fastened it to my shoulder.

"He said he could make and unmake souls." I hesitated, then went on: "Perhaps tonight——"

"I'm afraid for you. May I come and stay outside your door?"

I shook my head. "If Lucia is in any way connected with the orchid, I'm not afraid. Besides, O'Malley gave me until he came back to decide. I'm not afraid of *him—now!*"

Rex took my face in his two hands and kissed me gently. My arms stole around his neck. This time there were no warning whispers.

REX came early the next morning to hear what had happened. I told him that I had slept remarkably well with the orchid in a vase on the night table beside my bed, that toward morning I had had a confused dream in which Lucia with tears streaming from her eyes stood in front of a curious iron-studded door and shook her head, warning me that I must not go inside.

Neither of us could make anything of it. Then Rex asked, "Did you check up on O'Malley and Lucia?"

"Mrs. Trent had never heard of him, but finally after I kept pressing her she did remember Lucia speaking of an unusual-looking man she had met at a party, who had raved about her looks. Lucia had been a little excited by his fulsome admiration and rather wondered why he hadn't made any effort to date her. It was the day after that she disappeared." I reeled off the information I had gathered.

"It could be O'Malley. I had all the other girls' families approached, with no results except that one father remembered his daughter telling him practically the

same thing you've just reported, only he recalled the man's name. It *was* O'Malley. It's the first definite link we've had, but where it will lead to I've no idea. I can't see my way clear." Rex drew his brows together.

"Do you suppose Lucia's still alive?" I asked.

"Can't be, if your theory's right and her spirit is imprisoned in the flower."

"The dolls were."

"I don't know. I don't know anything. This whole thing's a labyrinth through which I can't find my way," Rex groaned. "The only clue I've got is in your hands, and it's dynamite. Still I have to use it. If you're willing——"

"I'll do anything," I said, little dreaming what was in his mind.

"There's danger, a very real danger, but I'll be around. I hate even to ask you, but seventeen girls have disappeared. It may be we can save them, or if not, others——" He broke off abruptly, then went on. "There's only one way to go about it. Could you bear to be nice to O'Malley?"

"Nice to O'Malley?" That was the last thing I had expected.

"Yes, lead him on. He's in love with you. Why, if he really is connected with these disappearances, you haven't been spirited away, I can't fathom. Perhaps, like Eastern potentates, he keeps a harem for his pleasure, but looks on you as the Ranee that must be really won according to Hoyle, or something like that. There's only one way to find out, as I see it. Lead him on, humor him until he gives himself away or we find a path through the labyrinth."

"You mean let him kiss me?" I gasped. "I'm afraid. Suppose there isn't a flower to save me."

"Wear the orchid. Somehow I feel that with it you're safe, and I'll be right on the job. Tell him you don't like me but I'm hard to shake. I'll have my men constantly covering us." Rex was more serious than I had ever seen him.

"He'll read my thoughts," I protested, remembering only too well the feelings I had experienced while Splondowski played.

"You must make your mind a blank so he can't get inside it. Will you do it, Louise—for humanity?"

"I'll do it—for you," I said fiercely. I knew how much Rex wanted to succeed with this particular assignment and what it would mean to his future if he did.

FOUR days passed with no sign from O'Malley, and on the fifth day a new sensation struck the city—another girl vanished, the eighteenth, Helen Ferguson. Again there was no trace of any kind. She had left her house to do some shopping. The whole thing was inexplicable.

Rex investigated at once, but found nothing. "It's incredible that no passer-by noticed anything," he told me, "and to make matters worse it gives O'Malley a clean bill of health, so far as I can see. He wasn't off his place. I've had it watched. Nothing unusual happened on the estate. The men I've got posted all around reported."

"No one went in?" I asked.

"Nothing passed the gates but his own Ford delivery truck, which went to market and returned full of provisions. It goes every other day. He has a retinue of servants and evidently buys largely."

"What was Helen Ferguson like?"

"Beautiful — auburn hair, greenish eyes, and a lovely complexion—noted for her skin, which was like a pale pink rose petal."

"I'm glad I'm not beautiful," I said, and shuddered.

"You are to me. I love your sweet little face." Rex leaned over and kissed

me to emphasize his point, and we forgot the problems for the time being.

Two more days went by, and it was practically a week since I had seen O'Malley, and the orchid was still as fresh as when he had given it to me. I wore it constantly, and kept it in water at night near my bed. But it gave no more signs of being anything but a flower; there were no whisperings, no assents or denials when I addressed questions to it, and I began to think there never had been.

On the morning of the eighth day I received a note. It was written on green paper with green ink. In one corner was engraved an orchid, and below it:

ORCHID HOUSE
RIVERDALE
NEW YORK

It was the type of paper a luxury-loving woman would have, but it was Angus O'Malley who had written the note:

Come to see my orchids Wednesday at four. I am asking Muriel and some others. Bring the good Mr. Stanton if you wish. I shall expect you —and my answer.

ANGUS O'MALLEY.

That was all. There was no beginning.

I phoned Rex. He was delighted.

"So much easier than I thought!" he crowed. "In a crowd you'll be perfectly safe."

If he had only known! But he didn't.

All the way up to Riverdale we laughed and joked and planned our future. It was only when we drew up before the great iron grille gates of Orchid House that I began to be afraid and the flower on my shoulder trembled as though it too echoed the wild beating of my heart.

"It's like a prison," I said, as the gates clanged shut behind us.

Rex was silent as we drove up the long, wooded road.

"He must own acres," he remarked at last.

Just then the house came within our range of vision. It was like a feudal castle—one of the German ones out of a fairy-tale. From any of the four towers Rapunzel might have let down her golden hair—or the fairy Melusine woven her spells.

"Don't worry," Rex's steady and cheerful voice broke into my thoughts. "I'll be right beside you; I'm armed, and I've men all around the outside."

I touched his hand, where it rested on the wheel. Then I assumed the bored air we had agreed upon. It was a good thing I did so, for when we drove under the porte-cochère and stopped it was Angus O'Malley who opened the car door for us. He greeted Rex with exaggerated courtesy. He kissed my hand lingeringly before he guided us into the house.

WHEN we passed through the doors we went back centuries into mediæval England, to a great room that was vaguely familiar.

"The Hall of Elthaue," our host said. "I had it copied; only I have heat and electricity."

There were about forty people in the hall, most of whom I knew. O'Malley was a charming host. He gave us tea—an utterly commonplace tea—and then took us all over the house and the conservatories, which were full of the most beautiful orchids I have ever seen. None of them, however, was like the yellow one I wore.

"Where is the plant this came from?" I asked him.

For a second he hesitated, then pointed to a moss-like ball with no bloom upon it. Somehow I felt he lied, but I could not dispute him.

When we returned to the house after our tour of the conservatories I looked

for Rex. Muriel had him in one corner. Someone came up to O'Malley and engaged him in a long discussion. I decided to slip off by myself and explore a little, for I had noticed that O'Malley had not taken us into one of the towers, although he had meticulously shown us everything else—even his own sleeping-quarters, which were in one of the towers but completely modern and fantastic with mirrored walls.

I made my way to where I thought the entrance of the tower would be, judging by the others I had seen. A tapestry covered the wall where the door should have been. I pulled it back and stepped inside to the circular room all the other towers had had, looked up at the same stone stairway, but in the tower half-way up the stairs barring the ascent was a door—a curious iron-studded door—the same door I had seen in my dreams!

"Are you Pandora or Bluebeard's wife?" O'Malley's voice was in my ear. He was standing right behind me. I swung around, deciding quickly that this was an emergency that called for the truth.

"I noticed you didn't show us one tower, and I confess to curiosity." I actually managed to be coy.

"These are my private rooms. Some day I will show them to you. But now, little white bird, you must tell me, is it love or hate?" His eyes searched mine.

I followed Rex's instructions. I made my mind a blank before I answered. Then I said shyly, "I wouldn't want you to hate me."

Joy leapt into his face for the moment, transfiguring it from a Brenda mask into something closer to humanity.

"Then it is love!" He caught my hand.

I held him off a little. "Perhaps, but you must be patient with me for a little. This has all been so quick. I am attracted to you, but I need time. You"—I hesitated, then rushed on—"you frighten me sometimes. You are not like other men."

I had struck the right note. His colossal ego was touched.

"You have spoken more of a truth than you know. See, I will be gentle. I will be kind." He took me in his arms tenderly and caressed me as though I had been a child. "In your arms I will forget that I am a lonely god."

He kissed me then, and I did not resist, though the small, still voice of the flower was again whispering, "Send him away," over and over in my ear.

Eventually he let me go. "We will announce our engagement immediately. I want to watch the good Mr. Stanton's face." Nero at the circus turning his great emerald for all to see.

Rex—the mention of his name brought him before my eyes and for one second made me forget the guard I was keeping on my mind. Only one second, but it was enough.

"So!" O'Malley's lips drew back from his teeth in a bestial snarl. "So it's the good Mr. Stanton you love and you are tricking me for his sake!" With unerring precision he hit the nail directly on the head. "So—you wanted to find out my secrets. Well, you shall."

He caught me by the wrist and dragged me toward the stairs. I screamed, but the sound died in my throat as he struck me on the side of the head with terrific force. He caught me as I fell, and then I knew nothing more.

When I came to, my head ached terribly and for a second I didn't know what had happened. Then I remembered and looked about for O'Malley. To my great relief I found that I was alone.

My dress was gone. I was wrapped in a lovely blue satin kimono, and I was lying on a long couch which took up one side of a barren, cell-like room. There was no other furniture. The walls were

of stone and there was no window. High up in the ceiling, which must have been at least twenty feet away, were a few round holes which evidently afforded ventilation. There was a carved wooden door, which I tried although I knew it would be locked. I was a prisoner. I could scream and yell, but no one would hear. But of course Rex would rescue me. I pinned all my hopes to that, and didn't even let myself think how impossible it would be.

Two more things I noticed. The yellow orchid I had worn was lying crushed to a pulp on the floor, as though it had been stamped upon, and there were little crimson spots all over that looked like blood. To take my eyes from it I looked at my wrist-watch. Seven fifteen. It must have been nearly six when I had started exploring, so I had been here in this prison for over an hour. Surely I must be missed. Surely Rex—— My thoughts died away in agonized fear.

I WAITED for what seemed an eternity but was actually only twenty minutes. Then I heard the sound of a bolt being shot back. A second later the heavy door swung upward and Angus O'Malley stood on the threshold.

He was dressed in a long Chinese robe which made him look more exotic than ever.

"Mr. O'Malley——" I began.

He held up his hand. "You little fool. Did you think you could fight me? That I who know the secrets of Cagliostro, of Nicodemus—yes, even of Merlin himself—could be deceived by a girl? Your friends have gone. The good Mr. Stanton has gone. I told them you were taken ill and asked me to send you home. I actually sent a car with a girl in it through the gates. Later that car will be discovered a complete wreck; the girl dressed in your clothes will be found dead, her face mutilated beyond recognition. No one will look for you after that."

With a sickening sensation I listened to him. All hope died away, for even Rex would accept such overwhelming evidence.

"What are you going to do with me?" I faltered. My lips were dry.

He looked at me and smiled, and there was more menace in that smile than in any words he had ever uttered.

"First I am going to show you my orchids—the rare ones," he said slowly.

An unholy light shone in his eyes as his fingers locked around my wrist like iron bands. He half led me, half pulled me through the door out into a hall, then up the stone stairway to another iron-studded door. I contemplated screaming, but quickly realized how futile that would be.

"You are wise," he said, reading my thoughts easily. "No one could hear. This tower is sound-proof, and only I know the secret of the door below."

He pressed part of the iron decoration and the door swung open. He pulled me into a room that was very hot. It was full of laboratory apparatus. There were several long tables or benches, covered with sheets. He led me to the far end, where there was a particularly long table with a complicated series of tubes and retorts suspended above it. Most of the table was covered with heavy linen of a peculiar blue shade that was tent-like in appearance, but at one end free from the cover I could distinguish a girl's head; beautiful auburn hair, a pale rose-leaf skin, and tortured brown eyes that looked into mine pleadingly.

"Helen Ferguson!" I gasped.

"Helen Ferguson," O'Malley repeated and held up the blue linen on the side so that I could see under the tent-like arrangement.

It was that moment I think that my hair turned white; for growing from her lovely body was the dark mass of an orchid plant!

I would have fainted, but O'Malley held me and forced me to listen by the sheer power of his will. "You alone are privileged to look at the miracle of the age. Only I can work such a miracle—a flower that lives, that absorbs the color, the beauty of whatever subject I select—a flower that I can talk to, that answers all my need for beauty, for love. Imagine wearing the beauty all men desire in my buttonhole. Truly in such moments I am a god."

"A god! You are a beast! That poor girl—is she alive?"

"Of course. The plant thrives on her life. It absorbs her color, her brain, her very soul into itself, and then when it has exhausted all she has to give, it blooms, and lives as long as I can keep what is left of the body intact."

"Dear God, how she must suffer!" I turned my face away from those anguished brown eyes and the terrible growth in her breast.

"Only so far as she knows her condition before the orchid absorbs her brain entirely. Of bodily suffering there is none. I sever the nerves when I implant the roots. I will explain——"

"No! No! I can't bear any more."

He laughed—an eery macabre laugh that pierced my soul.

"But you must. You wanted to see the plant from which the yellow orchid came; so look."

He dropped the blue linen back into place and swung me around until I faced another table, which he uncovered. There lay the body of my friend Lucia Trent, and it was horrible to see, for all the color had been drained from it. The shape, the features were still hers, but it was all shadowy—the hair that had been golden had the same pallor as her cheeks. She was like a vegetable from which the juice and pulp has been extracted.

"It's horrible!" I moaned. "Oh, Lucia, Lucia!"

"So she was your friend! That explains why she did not do my bidding. Her love for you was stronger than my commands."

His face was concentrated fury. If there had been any life in that pale shadowy form he would have stamped it out—just as he had destroyed the orchid.

"Take me away," I pleaded, "before I go mad."

He shook his head. "No, you are to stay. You have cheated me of a flower—you must replace it—look."

He threw open a door. Behind it on shelves in glass vases were sixteen strange orchids of colorings and forms never seen before. O'Malley leaned toward them and they suddenly became animated with life. They swayed to meet him, touching his cheeks, his lips, his eyes—caressingly. It was obscene and terrible to behold, and all the while there was a strange whispering that was even more terrible.

"They are my darlings—all I have asked from life until I met you—you who I thought would sit at my feet and learn wisdom, who would be my companion, sharer of my secrets, my mate"—he looked at me as though he were seeing me for the first time—"why, I cannot understand. Of course I knew you hadn't the color for a flower, and something in you touched me so that for a little while I became a man, but now I have reverted to my godhead."

The man was a raving maniac!

"I no longer desire you as a woman—and fortunately you will make a lovely orchid—a white orchid! See, in all my sixteen blossoms there is not a white one.

I have never tried a young woman before with white hair."

I did not know my hair was white. I thought him crazier than ever, but I did comprehend the fate that awaited me. I had given up hope of rescue. Rex would believe me dead. I could not escape, but I must put off the terrible moment. I could at least keep him talking—perhaps dissuade him from the awful thing he contemplated, from which my whole being revolted.

"How—how," I stammered, "could you get these girls here without leaving any trace?"

He smiled conceitedly. "The obvious is never noticed. I merely drove up beside them in an inconspicuous car when no one was near and offered a lift—I had of course met each girl before. Once inside the car, a quick hypodermic with a little serum of my own and they were under my control. Then I put a hat with a mourning veil on them and drove out into the country, where I changed cars."

"But no one ever saw them go through your gates!" I remembered Helen Ferguson and thanked God I could still keep him talking.

"My Ford delivery truck came through with supplies—an inanimate woman can easily be made into a bag of potatoes. Sometimes I drove it disguised as my chauffeur." He answered my question, then turned to the orchids.

"Good-bye for the present, my little darlings. Soon you shall have new companions." He shut the door and turned to me. "I shall wear you in my buttonhole—flaunt you in the eyes of the good Mr. Stanton, and you will caress me as the others do—my white orchid."

"No, no!" I screamed. "Kill me outright—anything but that."

As long as I live I will hate myself for being such a coward, but the horrors with which I was surrounded were too much for me. I begged, I pleaded, but he only laughed at me. Finally he flung me into a chair and tied my wrists to its arms.

"I must prepare for the operation," he said.

He went away and presently returned with a dark ball of fungus root. Soon those hideous things would be feeding upon me. The thought was so horrible that I must have fainted, for the next thing I was conscious of was O'Malley dressed in a white surgeon's gown standing before a perfectly equipped operating-table that he had wheeled into the room. Near it was a long table fixed like the one on which Helen Ferguson lay. Soon I would be like her, unable to move, or to speak, or to suffer anything except the most terrible mental anguish.

O'Malley was adjusting a tray of instruments now. It seemed to me that I couldn't see him quite so clearly. Was terror making me blind? Through the heat of the room I noticed a sweet, sickly smell. Was it some kind of anesthetic O'Malley was using? Was this the end? Vaguely I saw him pick up a hypodermic syringe and start toward me. As he came it seemed to me that he swayed. The sickly sweet smell was overpowering me. This was the end. The blackness engulfed me and even the horror was gone.

From far off I seemed to hear Rex's voice calling. "Darling, darling," it was saying over and over.

I wanted to open my eyes, but I couldn't. There seemed to be weights on them. At last I managed to flutter my lids, and looked up into Rex's face. It seemed to have aged. There were strained lines I had never seen before.

"Thank God she's coming around!" he said.

I was immediately conscious of other men bending over me and the murmur-

ing rustle that the wind makes through the leaves of trees. Perhaps I had actually died and was in heaven, only then Rex——

"Rex," I whispered weakly. "Is it really you—am I alive?"

"My darling!" He gathered me in his arms convincingly. "You are all right. Thank God! It was a close thing."

"O'Malley didn't——" I didn't dare look down at myself.

"No, no—we were in time. Oh my dear!" He buried his face in my neck as though overcome with emotion.

One of the men spoke. "I think we should get Miss Howard to the hospital. She needs treatment and rest."

Rex pulled himself together. "I'll carry her to the car," he said and picked me up.

"Where are we?" I was tremendously weak and helpless but my head was clear.

"She should be quiet," the same man spoke.

"I must know what happened," I whispered to Rex.

"We're leaving the grounds of Orchid House," Rex answered.

"O'Malley?" I shivered convulsively.

"He will never trouble you again. O'Malley is dead," Rex assured me with a tone of finality in his voice.

When we were in the car and I was resting in Rex's arms with the cool night air reviving me more and more, I asked him to tell me what had happened, and he, knowing I could not rest until I knew, satisfied my curiosity.

"When O'Malley said you had been taken ill and he had sent you home, I knew he lied. You would never have gone off like that without a word to me! I knew something was wrong. I left almost at once and contacted one of my men who had been watching the gate. He had seen the car leave and a girl in it. He recognized your clothes but was sure the girl wasn't you; he'd seen you on the way in. I'd known that if O'Malley was actually connected with the disappearance we would have to raid Orchid House, so I was prepared with a new kind of gas that paralyzes. If an antitoxin is given within a certain length of time it is harmless; otherwise the person who inhales it dies. I knew O'Malley would do nothing while the guests were there; so I waited and got ready. As soon as everyone had left, my men and I, fully protected with masks, entered Orchid House, spraying the gas as we went. It is very powerful and travels so fast that a little is sufficient. By the time we'd reached the house the servants and guards were overcome.

"I had noticed that O'Malley hadn't shown us the fourth tower. I made for it and we sprayed the gas under the door. Then we tried to open it. You'll never know the agony I went through when we couldn't. It was so awful, I lived a thousand years in a few minutes. You might already be dead, but if we were in time to save you from O'Malley, unless we got through that door before long it would be too late for the antidote, and the gas would kill you. Finally, as a last resort, we blew off the door, and got to you just in time to administer the serum and carry you out into the open air.

Rex paused and brushed my hand against his cheek. The miracle had happened—I had been snatched back from the brink of unutterable horror just in time.

"I had the strange orchids destroyed—O'Malley and the girl were paralyzed. They died long before you came around. We didn't try to save them."

"I'm so glad—oh Rex, Rex, I'll never forget her eyes!" I clung closer to him for comfort.

"My dear, my dear, I know. I've seen

your hair. Some day you will tell me everything, but not now—now you must forget what's happened and rest and recover from all this. I will do my best to help and to make you happy." He leaned down and kissed me tenderly.

THE years have passed. Rex has kept his promise. We have known happiness too great for words to describe. But even that happiness has never been able to wipe away the memory of the affair of the Strange Orchids.

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# Rescued

By EDGAR DANIEL KRAMER

I sought my love in heaven,
  But lo, she was not there!
The weeping of the angels
  Was solace for despair.

I turned away from heaven,
  The while I called her name,
To stumble through the shadows
  And tread the stairs of flame.

"What would you?" Satan queried
  And sought to bar my way;
"I seek my love," I answered,
  "Who left me yesterday."

"Your love!" he gasped and trembled,
  Then shrank away from me,
And where the damned were wailing
  I found the Upas Tree.

While blazing pits were casting
  Red shadows through the gloom,
I found whom I was seeking
  Heaped with the Upas bloom.

I lifted her with kisses,
  I held her with my eyes;
"Lad, you have come," she whispered,
  "And this is Paradise!"

# The Brood of Bubastis

By ROBERT BLOCH

*A shuddery story of a ghastly charnel crypt in a weird cave in the hills of Cornwall*

I WISH I did not have to write these lines. Ordinary suicide notes are morbid enough, and the tale which I must tell is infinitely more ghastly. Still, before I seek forgetfulness in the black boon of death, I feel impelled to leave this final testament.

I owe it to my friends, who have never understood the frightening, unexplained metamorphosis of personality I underwent upon my return from England. Perhaps this will serve to explain my abhorrent and unnatural zoöphobia—feliphobia, rather. My quite inexplicable fear of cats caused them much anguish, I know, and for a while there was talk of a "nervous breakdown." Now they shall hear the truth. I trust it clears up other points which may have puzzled them: my voluntary retirement to the country, the breaking off of all personal contacts and correspondence, and my brusk rejection of all their sympathetic advances. Here, then, is my final explanation to those I once knew and loved.

Here, too, I trust, is material of value to students of archeology and ethnology; perhaps the first example of ancient legends substantiated by the testimony of an eye-witness. I hope that it will prove useful.

It is quite possible, however, that both my friends and scientific authorities will dismiss this entire screed as the work of a crazed and degenerate mind. It does not really matter, though. By the time it reaches other eyes I shall have gone on to find the nepenthe that lies in death. Maybe it is for the best if these words are not believed, for the memories behind them are filled with a haunting horror that drives me to doom.

But be it called truth, raving, or warning—here is the tale.

ON NOVEMBER twelfth of this last year, I sailed for England. My friends knew that I planned to visit my old college companion, Malcolm Kent, at his Cornwall estate. Malcolm had been a fellow-student of mine, and we had formed a close bond of friendship, cemented by our mutual interests in psychology, philosophy, and metaphysics.

I had a pleasant crossing, spiced with eager anticipation of the visit to come, for I had heard much of Malcolm's fine old home. He had often spoken in detail of the ancient manor in which he dwelt, and reminisced at length upon his ancestral heritage. His was an old family, steeped in the archaic traditions of the past—a past filled with Celtic myths, Pictish legends, and still more remote fables of antique days. The countryside about his estate was deeply imbued with hoary and fantastic lore. He had recounted olden whispers of goblin-folk, the dark dwarfs and gnomes that burrowed in the bogs and swamps. Ghost tales and stories of furtive wizardries seemed to spring from the very twilight land itself. I looked forward to an interesting experience.

So, at first, it seemed to be. I was enchanted with the Cornish countryside: a region of mystic mountains, cloud-haunted hilltops, and purple peaks that towered

above wild forest glens and green-grottoed swamplands. Here was a region rich in romance—the dark land of Irish, Saxon, Roman, and primitive pagan gods. Witches could walk in these woods, sorcerers sweep across these sullen skies on their satanic steeds. I was well pleased with the place.

I found in Malcolm an agreeable host. He had not changed; the tall, fair-haired youth had become a mature man whose cultured tastes still coincided harmoniously with my own. There was a world of wisdom in his pale blue eyes, and a warmth of welcome in his smile when first we met at the gate of his estate.

Together we walked up the long tree-spanned pathway which led to the door of his dwelling. Here I stopped for a moment to survey the imposing structure.

The Kent manor was a fine example of good old English architecture. It was large, with low, ivy-covered wings that jutted out on the sides; typically British solidness seemed to exude from the place.

Now I can think of it only with re-

"His eyes were mad and his strength that of a fanatic."

pulsion, for everything connected with that place is tinged with dread for me.

The interior was, I suppose, beautiful. Now I detest the thought of long, shadowed halls. I don't like to let my mind dwell on the stone study, for it was there that the affair started.

We had dined well, and Malcolm suggested we retire and chat before the fire. After perfunctorily discussing trivial matters of our recent years, our conversation ebbed.

It was then that I sensed in Malcolm a peculiar hesitancy of manner. At first I ascribed it to a vague embarrassment on his part. I admit that I was gazing about me with great curiosity.

I noted that his library on occultism had been greatly augmented since his first interest in it, during college. The walls were solidly shelved with books bearing unmistakable earmarks of the mantic arts. The skull on the mantel was a rather affected touch, I thought, though there was a genuine note of weirdness in some of the paintings and tapestries. But my intent scrutiny of these things, I felt, could not wholly explain his air of *eagerness*. He was nervous, his eyes ever on the floor as I gazed about the room. It was almost as though he wanted me to see certain things without his telling me; as though this place had some secret to impart of which he dared not speak.

At length I grew impatient. The silence, the dim luminance of candles and fire, all affected my nerves.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing," he replied, easily. Too easily!

"Aren't hiding any bodies around here, are you?" I forced jocularity. "No, of course not." He smiled, then leaned forward, earnestly.

"Are you still as interested in the occult as you used to be?" he asked.

Something in the intent tone of his voice warned me.

"Well, to tell the truth, I haven't studied much lately. Writing, you know, takes up pretty near all my time. And then, too, we got to a certain stage where ordinary work must cease. I can't get the use of the more advanced books."

"I have them," Malcolm said, carelessly indicating his shelves. "But that's not the point. Are you still interested?"

"Yes," I replied.

Was it fancy, or did his eyes light up with a disturbing gleam? Did a look of triumph cross his face?

"I think that I have something of importance to tell you," he began, slowly. "But I warn you, it may prove shocking. So if you'd rather we talked of something else——"

"Go ahead," I murmured. "Let's have it."

For a long moment he averted his head. He seemed to be nerving himself to speak; his glance avoided mine again, as though attempting to conceal some hidden fear. It may have been a trick of the candlelight, but when he looked up, that queer glitter again shone in his eyes. When at last he spoke, his voice was very low.

"Very well, then. I shall tell you the truth—all of it. It will be wise for me to do this, perhaps. I don't like to bear the knowledge alone any longer."

Then, as I sat silent, he began his tale, and for the next hour I was transported to a world of mad imagination. While he spoke, it seemed as though the very shadows on the wall crept closer to listen, while the wind wailed a dirge beneath the windows, piping a threnody to his hints of hidden horrors.

I heard him out. Afterward the words seemed to blur in my brain, so that I forgot many of his statements and remem-

bered only their loathsome effect on me. Perhaps it is just as well, for at the time those stark, shuddery sentences moved me overmuch. The general details of his story, however, remain clear.

For the past two years Malcolm had become intensely interested in neighborhood folk-lore. Time hung heavy on his hands, and his obscure studies impelled him to seek practical explanations of local legends. His questioning of the country rustics had brought to light much that was fascinating. He corroborated what he heard from them by reading archeological treatises, and there was much in ethnology and anthropology regarding the ancient days and the peoples then settled here. He read of Druidic times, and correlated his readings with certain still-current fables telling of olden rites in the glades of oak. He rode across the countryside to view remains of menhirs and partly-standing altars ascribed to the priests of this primal cult.

He learned of Roman invasions and Roman gods, and had repeated to him the fable of Maximus Lupus, whom a dragon devoured on the midnight moor. The fantastic stories of Little People were substantiated in country folk-lore, and from then on he delved deeply into the demonology of many races and a score of centuries. Sea-serpents haunted the gloomy coasts, and mermaids shrilled a siren song above the storm. Kelpies and leprechauns croaked from bog and tarn, while certain peaks and hillside caves were reputed to be the abode of the dread trolls, dwarfs, and unfriendly small dark folk of pre-Pictish days. Witch rites, the Black Mass, the Damned Coven —all seemed to have their place in the history of the countryside. Such myths offered a wide field for investigation.

This research had finally driven Malcolm past all sane boundaries. Abandoning the garbled distortions of the yokels, and the cautious, tentative references of historians, he plunged boldly into the black tomes of evil lore. At first the more reputable of such dubious authorities sufficed him, but his way led him ever into wilder and more fantastic wisdom. He managed to borrow Ludvig Prinn's almost legendary Latin edition of *De Vermis Mysteriis,* and in that cryptic repository of nightmare knowledge he found much over which to ponder perplexedly.

That was several months ago. Since then he had returned the volume—it was the property of the British Museum—but had made a number of notes from it. Among these scribblings was an almost incredible statement which greatly excited his fevered fancy.

Since then he had checked the facts in established archeology texts and books on the subject of race-migration. They echoed the truth. Substantially, the theory was simple: the Egyptians had once colonized Cornwall!

According to the fragmentary allusions Malcolm had discovered, the strange dark peoples of Africa had sailed up the coast lands in their Phenician-built galleys. This much was known from the wrecked remnants of several craft unearthed on desolate and sand-swept shores. Later and even more startling advances had been made during the investigation of numerous primitive, abandoned mines dotting the local heaths. These had been previously ascribed to early Gaels, but the familiar symbols and ideography of ancient Egypt were unmistakably inscribed on the rock walls of the deeper chasms. Most of the mines bore traces of having been hastily abandoned, thus accounting for their discontinuance.

Comparison with accounts of early navigation did much to substantiate the theory. The fleets of Egypt sailed to the Orient; why not westward as well?

Malcolm put forth these ideas in tones of such profound eagerness and agitation that I was tempted to inquire as to his particular interest in them.

He told me, intensely, and at length. For two definite reasons he was interested. First—there was one of those Egyptian mines in this very neighborhood.

He had stumbled across it quite by chance, during a walk along the moors. Upon descending the outer rim of a precipitous cliff, he had noticed faint remnants of a definite pathway around a ledge. Upon following the trail out of curiosity he found himself standing before a deep, cavernous indentation in the wall of the ledge. Half obscured by weeds and branches, an aperture yawned inward, seemingly leading to the very bowls of the earth below the moor. He cleared away enough of the debris to wriggle through, and discovered a long, slanting tunnel that stretched blackly before him. Flashlight in hand, he had entered. There was a musty fetor in the darkness, an odor of furtive decay. Dust danced about his feet as he floundered on. The burrow widened, until a cyclopean maze of inner passages confronted him. Here he had turned back, as his torch was failing fast, but not before he had seen certain unmistakable hieroglyphic designs in the archaic style of Egypt.

He had deferred his return until I arrived. Now we could go together.

"But," I interjected, "I think this is a task for reputable authorities. Why not publish your findings and invite a group of recognized savants to aid you in the project?"

He demurred. We had best go alone, until we were really certain of the extent and importance of our discovery. I saw his point, and agreed.

"Didn't you mention having a second reason for your moodiness?" I asked.

He again avoided my glance. "Never mind that now. It's getting late. I'll tell you tomorrow, when we get there."

"Tomorrow?" I gasped.

"Why not? Turn in now, and get a good night's rest. We're off in the morning."

I let it go at that, but as I went up to bed I could not help but remember his last, curiously twisted smile.

2

It was a long walk across the moor in that misty, early morning fog. Malcolm and I both grunted under our burden of food, torches, and other apparatus. Groping in gray gloom, we skirted the steep edge of a seaward cliff until Malcolm found the proper path. Then we began our descent. Hanging in space, I heard the roar of the mist-obscured surf from far below, and the brisk breeze sent spray to sting my face and hands. Amidst the shrill, mocking cries of the gulls, we clambered along the narrow ledge until it broadened sufficiently to permit of more casual passage. At last Malcolm turned to me and indicated the spot for which we searched.

There was the tunnel, just as he had described it—a black fissure in the rock; a thin opening that looked as though it were scratched in the stone by a gigantic claw of some ogreish monster. The hole was deep and black, and as I contemplated it I received my first definite impression of uneasiness.

I have never liked the dark places beneath the earth. The sight of caves and tunnels brings a train of almost atavistic recollection. I instinctively associate such burrows with death and graves. And too many unwholesome legends seem to cluster around caverns. Perhaps it is a relic of primitive times, but caves in my mind always conjure up a vision of mythical

dragons and vast, lumbering beasts; of black, half-animal races of troglodytes; of vaults and catacombs given over to the dead. And this sinister slit in the ageless rock looked oddly unnatural. Consequently I paused before it, suspicion mounting within me.

"This—this doesn't look like a mine to me," I said. "However primitive, I don't see how ore could be carried up the cliff, and the opening is too narrow. I don't like it. Are you sure you're not mistaken?"

Malcolm smiled. It was a peculiar smile, tinged with sardonic amusement.

"I'm not mistaken," he said. "And it isn't a mine. I know that. But it all ties up with the second reason for my moodiness which I promised to explain. I'd better tell you before we go in."

He spoke. It was a strange place to impart such a secret; on a fog-wrapped ledge half-way between sea and sky, before a dark doorway to the inner earth. But the secret was fitting for such a scene as this.

"I lied to you last night," Malcolm said calmly. "I didn't tell you all I studied, or all I found out. There's more, much more, behind this visit than a mere glimpse of ancient times."

He paused. "Have you ever heard of Bubastis?" he asked.

"Bubastis?" I was a little puzzled. "Why, yes. Old Egyptian city, wasn't it? And isn't there a god, Bubastis—Bast, or Pasht, they call it?"

"Yes." Again that puzzling smile. "Bubastis, or Bast, was the cat-goddess of Egypt during the days of the Pharaohs. According to the proper myth-cycle, Bubastis was the daughter of Isis. The temples of the goddess were located separately in the cities of Bubastis and Elephantine."

"What are you getting at?" I was frankly bewildered; he told me this with such an air of grave importance, and his recurring smile was baffling. "What do you mean?" I asked, impatiently.

"I mean that we are now entering the new temple of Bubastis," he purred. "Don't gape at me! If you've read Prinn's *Saracenic Rituals* chapter, or the Roman contemporary historians, you must know that Elephantine and Bubastis were destroyed. It is hinted that the Priests of Bast were blaspheming against the reigning religions, and their sacrifices were atrocious. Finally an army was sent against their cities and the temples were ravished. But—and this is important—the priests were said to have vanished; escaped somewhere, with their acolytes. They came here."

"Here? You mean, to Cornwall?"

"Exactly. That's why those stupid fools were deceived by the mines. Most of them were blinds—with hollow shafts leading to temples beneath."

"But what were they trying to do?"

"The renegade priests knew black arts. Their worship was perverted. Bast was a ghoul-goddess, remember, and her feline fangs must know blood. And besides, the priests were experimenting. Somewhere in the old *Dæmonolorum* it is written that there was a sect of Egypt which believed literally in their gods; believed that Anubis, Bast, and Set could assume human form. That is to say, that the cat-goddess could be brought to life. And there were wise men in those days; science and biology were not unknown. It is the belief of savants that the priests of Bast were mating animals and humans in an attempt to create a hybrid—a hybrid with the attributes of their deity. For this they were expelled, and they fled here."

Incredible! But the cavern gaped its grinning mouth in mockery, and the fog twisted its way into my brain.

Malcolm went on.

"Clever, clever priests! Here, in the

safety of the under-earth, they rebuilt their shattered fanes. With slaves and devotees they continued their experiments. I know that within this very moor are treasures far greater than those of the Pyramids or temple tombs. That's what we're going to see now. I don't want any meddling experts to gain the credit. It's a secret you and I alone must know."

He could not help but see my face.

"Don't be afraid, you fool! I've been here many times, no matter what I told you. I know the way. It's wonderful, I tell you."

He pushed me through the cleft, and we wriggled into darkness. Was it a trick? Was Malcolm, perhaps, unbalanced? Was I? The darkness did not reply, though its black strands were already coiling around my brain.

The torch-glow guided me through the fissure and into a long, sloping passage where I could once more stand erect. Wading through dust, we walked between narrow, carefully chiseled walls for what seemed an interminable time. Already the nightmare aspects of this whole strange adventure were deadening all rational thoughts. Now Malcolm led the way, through twisted burrows that stretched like hollow tentacles of some unseen horror ahead. Walking deep in the ageless earth, beneath a moor! With every step, my time-sense faded away, until I might easily believe that we had left centuries behind and were again in primal days.

MOLE-LIKE, clambering through the shaft, we descended. The utter queerness of the place precluded speech, and we went silently onward. It was quite hot, but jets of warmer air were wafted from gulfs ahead.

The way widened. We were approaching the caverns now. This, indeed, was no mine-shaft. And the pit we had just entered was unmistakable.

It was a tomb. Basalt walls were carefully chiseled in geometric lines. The floor was set in stone, and here the dust was not so thick. This touch of artificial design was peculiarly disturbing after the utter crudity of the passageway. But what occupied the room was more disturbing still.

Slabs of stone lined the walls—slabs of stone, and on them, mummy-cases; dust-covered, moldering, but unmistakable.

It was true! There was no mistaking the familiar forms. And now, through the discolorations, I saw designs on the walls. Egyptian designs, four thousand miles away from Egypt and three thousand years away from the present!

"The early priests," Malcolm said, softly. "They were buried here, just as though they were at home."

I would have stopped and attempted to peer into some of the sarcophagi, but Malcolm intervened.

"This is nothing," he whispered. "There are—ah—real sights ahead."

We left the hall. I was beginning to feel the fear that crept upon me. Malcolm was right, and what did he mean now by showing me "real" sights?

Gnawing curiosity overcame my dread, as I followed him through the ossuarium and into a second chamber. More slabs, more mummy-cases. There must have been hundreds of people dwelling here at one time! There were side-corridors now, all artificially hewn in the rock. These perhaps had led to the dwelling-places of the inhabitants.

A question flashed through my thoughts. "Malcolm," I said, "what did these people feed on here? There's no place for cultivation of food-stuffs?"

He faced me with that damned smile of his again. "Bubastis was, I told you, a

ghoul-goddess. The priests and worshippers *emulated* her."

A sickening wave of repulsion swept over me. This was all so unnatural—it savored of nightmares and old things that haunt men in their dreams. I wanted very much to turn back, but Malcolm strode resolutely ahead, and he beckoned imperiously, leading on to further horrors. We entered pits.

Our lights, while strong enough to penetrate ordinary darkness, proved eerily dim amidst these black and eldritch walls through which we now wandered. Bat-like shadows basked and hovered just outside the luminance of our torches, and occasionally dispersed to hint at what lay behind. At first I was irritated by the lack of illumination, but I was soon to give thanks that it was no brighter. As it was, I saw more than enough; for in this third room, Malcolm allowed me to examine some of the mummies.

What unnatural life had festered and flourished here in the black bosom of earth? That first coffin was awful. Ghoul-like, I clawed the lid from the case and peered at what lay within. The thing was perfectly embalmed, and as I unwrapped it with trembling haste, the face came into view. It crumbled, thank heaven, almost immediately, but not until I saw the malformed creature within.

Two dead eyes stared from the rigid face of a dark-skinned priest. Two dead eyes, set in a forehead withered with decay—*a forehead from which protruded the hideous, misshapen head of a tiny serpent!*

"Skin-grafting," I gasped, weakly.

"No. Look closer." Malcolm's voice was grave, but I knew he smiled.

I looked again, as the air putrefied that withered countenance before my eyes.

I reeled. It was unmistakable, though sanity clutched vainly for another explanation. There was nothing to do but face the monstrous truth—that serpent's head actually *grew* on the mummy's brow. And since it, too, was mummified—but I dared not finish the thought. Malcolm again supplied the ghastly answer.

"It was alive, when he was."

I ROSE to my feet and went on. There was nothing else to do. Horror supplies a merciful anesthesia of its own, and I was partly drugged by that first dread realization. I must have been, else I should have gone mad viewing the sights that followed.

Malcolm was right. The priests had mated animals with humans. We opened other cases; that is, Malcolm did, while I stood fixed and fascinated beside him. There was a Pan-thing, with a horned forehead and a face that even through centuries still held a goatish leer. In one spot we discovered a fiendish trinity—three dwarfed and stunted faces on a single head and neck. The most frightful ravings of archaic mythology were all duplicated here—gargoyle, chimera, centaur, harpy—parodied in the Gorgonic features of leering, long-dead priests.

Then there was the section farther on with the bodies. Lycanthropic sights were revealed as Malcolm hacked away the case-coverings. The stench of natron hung like a miasma above the violated sarcophagi of creatures with human heads and the mummified bodies of apes. There was a hoofed horror with vestigial remnants of a tail, and a Ganesha-like thing with the enormous trunk of an elephant. Some of those we saw were evidently failures: noseless, eyeless, faceless freaks with extra arms; and finally an awful corpse without limbs, whose swollen neck grew into a gaping, headless maw. All mercifully dissolved into dust after a moment.

By this time all semblance of normality had departed from me. I followed Malcolm from slab to slab, wrenching off outer casings and unwinding each new terror. Sated, I feasted my eyes on new perversions and greater blasphemies.

When I thought of how these things had been born—what mad, unnatural experiments had performed these matings—I could hardly control myself. It was all long ago, I knew, but the very thought of such things existing in an outwardly sane universe was terrifying.

I refuse to let myself admit how deeply we had burrowed in that accursed labyrinth when the horror came. Malcolm and I, our torches trembling in hands palsied with dread, stumbled down a sable spiral of rock-hewn stairs. The memory of those things in the crypts above buzzed in my brain; else I would not have ventured on into the noisome, fear-infested darkness — that seething, slithering darkness in which our very shadows drowned.

Malcolm was no longer my companion. He seemed utterly detached. He was horribly familiar with our way, and strangely calloused. His silence oppressed me; with diabolical abandon he plodded down the stairs, his intent body straining forward as if avid to meet and mingle with dread yet to come.

Nevertheless, I followed him. I could not bear to go back alone, and my voice refused to function when I thought of suggesting it. Somehow, this whole thing was like a dream, and I was afraid that the sound of my own conversation would shatter that impression and make me aware of this awful reality. Besides, Malcolm was now literally racing down the stairs, and I must go on to intercept him. I meant to lead him back again to the world of light before it was too late.

Or did I? Horror swept over me in sweet black waves of ecstasy. The steps which I descended seemed to lure onward to new, infinitely enchanted nightmares. My being was wrenched between sharp, hysterical fear for the sake of Malcolm, and a grinning delight, a loathly lusting for terrors to come.

We staggered down the stairs. There were gusts of odious vapor; venom-brewed stenches, chill breezes that dripped with dampness. From far below the wind droned a dirge that was a death-rattle in the dark. But these went almost unnoticed. What little thought I still possessed was occupied with visual evils.

3

The winding walls of the shaft we descended were gelid black in the glare of our lights, but they were not bare. There were pictures—more Egyptian art, but not conventional ideographic work like that in the catacombs above. These sketches were disturbingly different, with great, sprawling figures, like those traced by an idiot in sand. Once again we viewed the monsters I was trying to forget; the snake-men, the satyr-creatures, the deformed cacodemons we found in the upper tombs. But now we saw them pictured in life, and it was worse than any imagining. These caricatures of humanity were shown while engaging in certain acts, and the needs they performed were evil. There were scenes which told an ancient story all too well—glimpses of the living monsters sacrificing to their gods, and gratifying their lusts. Among these were pictures of normal men; high priests, I suppose, and they were mingled with the beast-herd in lechery so perverted that it sickened me.

But Malcolm laughed. Spasm after spasm of cackling mirth welled from his rasping throat. He chuckled with a terrible, gloating rictus at my look of dread. I turned the light of my torch away from

the walls and went blindly forward down the remaining stairs. If I had been normal I should have guessed what lay below, after seeing those grimacing frescoes of cannibalistic, necrophilic animal-men. I might have remembered Malcolm's sly allusions to the Priests of Bast, and their efforts to create an unholy life for their god.

But I was not normal; so I followed Malcolm's scurrying shape until the stairs ended.

I will be very brief here, and spare myself as much of the memory as possible.

The caverns below were immense; perhaps they were the product of a great air-bubble in the earth's inner crust. It was hot and dark down there, but for that I am glad. The darkness and suddenly increased perspiration blurred my eyes. Even so, I could not fail to see the tormenting truth.

The floor of this pit stretched off into interminable burrows beyond, each gaping its black and hungry mouth. And before each mouth there was a little pile of bones. Bones, osseous dust; a shambles of skulls. Even from a distance I could see the marks of gnawing teeth in the splintered death's-heads. A thought seared through me.

There had been pictures on the wall—pictures of beast-men feeding on human flesh, on one another. Perhaps those buried in the tombs above were the *human* experiments; then these bones represented the other, nearly animal, creatures. Just how near the old priests had approached to their idea of a godhead I dared not surmise. Many of the bones before me hinted of ghastly spawnings between beast and man.

It was then that I saw the altar. A bare black stone reared loathsomely up in the center of the cavern floor; a stark, shining surface that sprang from the rock beneath. But the place where it met the floor was entirely buried beneath bones.

As I gazed at them in the low light, I clutched Malcolm's shoulder for support. For I saw—I saw!

These were no disarticulated skeletons; these osseous fragments before the sinister altar! These were *fresh* bones! And among the shredded, fleshy remnants that clung to them were tattered bits of cloth and leather—*English cloth and leather!*

What did it mean? The priests of Bast died, and their creatures devoured one another after them. But what did they sacrifice to on the black altar; what lurked in the ebon burrows beyond, that still crept forward to feast? And who fed it?

I looked into Malcolm's twitching visage and read the answer to my questions. From the expression on that laughing, demented countenance I knew him to be completely crazed.

"There's no dust on *this* floor," I found myself whispering. "No dust."

"No, you fool." He glared into my eyes, as he gripped my wrists. "There's no dust where things still *move around.* I can see that you noticed the bones. I might as well tell you the truth.

"Do you know what this was? The temple of Bubastis! That altar held its sacrifice, when the priests offered up their beast-man victims to the god. That was the altar from which the god took its prey—*and by the eternal, it still does!*

"Yes, tremble. It's well you do. You'll need to shudder before I've done with you. You're not the first to follow me down these stairs in the past six months; those bones tell their own story. I've shown some of the local people this spot.

"You see, the god is hungry. The god needs food. At first I was afraid, but now I know that if I please the god with sacrifices it will not harm me. Perhaps in time it will teach me the secrets of the dead old priests, and then I shall know many things. But the god needs blood. Blood!"

He dragged me, weak and half fainting with shock and terror, across that dreadfully dustless floor, shambling as though in the grip of some insane compulsion. Before I was able to struggle or resist he had me up against the black altar, and we fought knee-deep in gleaming bones.

His eyes were mad, and his strength that of a fanatic. I screamed and screamed, until his hands grasped my throat and choked me. But even as I fought him, my brain battled against its own fears.

Sacrifices, and a Feeder from the Pit. . . . What cursed experiment of the dead priests still groped about in the gloom beyond? . . . What chewed those bones?

A phrase from some book flashed through my head. "Ghoul—Chewer of Corpses."

MALCOLM lifted me on the altar, then turned his head and gazed across the charnel chamber to the burrows. He called, shouted, in unintelligible gibberish that resembled the tongue of ancient Egypt.

Then came the unmentionable rustling from the black openings beyond. Something was waddling into view out of the pits; something *emerged*.

Chewer of Corpses!

With the strength of the doomed I leapt from the altar, and my fist crashed into Malcolm's grinning, exultant face. He toppled across the black slab as I turned and ran across the cavern to the stairs. But by the time I reached it the thing had completely emerged; emerged, and stalked across the floor to the altar-stone where Malcolm lay. And it lifted him, though he moaned when he felt his body being dangled in those flabby paws. He hung like a broken doll, while the thing bent its rugose head and opened its mouth.

Chewer of Corpses!

That is what I sobbed as I turned and fought my way up those dark, basaltic stairs. That is the phrase I moaned as I lurched through nether halls of twilight where the monstrous mummies lay; that is what I crooned as I clambered back along the outer shaft. And when the sudden shock of sunlight burst upon my face at the entrance to the ledge, I weakly murmured the words as I sank into unconsciousness.

I was strangely calm when I recovered. I managed the climb to the top of the cliff, and even made the mile journey across the moor. Weak as I was, I packed and caught a train at the village station.

Only that night did I sink into the fevered dreams that have made life an unbearable torment ever since. I was a sick man on the boat, and when I reached New York I shut up my apartment for ever.

I CAN only surmise as to the termination of the affair. Whether Malcolm's disappearance is ascribed to me I do not know; whether the disputed fate of the rustics he lured to death has been forgotten, I cannot say. Nor does it really matter.

What does matter is the necessity for immediate investigation of the horror below those moors; that blasphemy that broods beneath.

I can no longer bear the blight of memory; so I leave this task to other hands. Let men do what they will—study the place if they wish, but by all means destroy it, lest there be a repetition some day of my own tragic experience.

I can force myself to coherence no longer. Since that awful day I have pondered overmuch on what I heard, and

worse still—what I *guessed*. That is what impels me to take my life.

Yes, there was the pit, and the priests of Bast dwelt there. It is all true about their experiments with men and beasts, their creation of loathsome monsters in the black burrows builded beneath the earth. Thank God they died off and destroyed one another as they did. For that alone I can be grateful.

But I have learned more than that. Now I know *what* those unholy wizards meant to do; why they mated beasts and men. I know what they wished to create to rule over them, and what they *did* create at the last—the thing that still lives in the farther pit.

That is what I cannot endure to remember—the sight of the thing Malcolm madly meant to serve; the thing that killed him—the secret of the priests of Bast.

It came rustling out of the darkness in the pit; the great blind thing that seized Malcolm as he lay on its altar. It grasped him in cruel claws, and gnawed or nuzzled at his throat. It was the Chewer of Corpses.

There on the altar it crouched, ten feet tall—the mockingly human figure, like that of the lioness-creatures pictured on the walls. The giant, human figure, but oh! that head! . . .

The priests had succeeded at the last. They brought their god to earthly life.

That head—*the leering, ravening muzzle of a carnivorous beast!* It haunts me, for now I know that Malcolm Kent met his death at the hands of the living, breathing, hybrid monster, whom the priests made.

The thing that killed him was *the Cat-goddess of Bubastis!*

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# Resting-Place

By CLARENCE EDWIN FLYNN

I hope they lay me in a quiet place,
  Quiet and lovely, with some flowers there,
And overshadowing trees to lend their grace,
  And green grass softly growing everywhere.

I hope it will be where the eye can see
  Nothing but beauty upon every side,
Where sunshine mellows, and the winds are free,
  And spaces are inviting, high, and wide.

Not that it matters to the senseless clay,
  But I shall want to come sometimes in spring,
When Life and Youth are happy in their day,
  And stand a little while, remembering.

# The Guardian of the Book

By HENRY HASSE

*A strange and curious tale of cosmic horror, of the Outer Ones from beyond the galaxy, and a soul-shattering experience of stark terror*

I AM always keeping an eye open for old second-hand bookstores. And, as my business takes me to all parts of the city, I have not a few times entered such places to spend an odd half-hour barging among shelves and stacks of musty volumes, often to emerge joyously with some item particular to any one of my several hobbies and interests.

On this particular February evening I was hurrying homeward, and as I crossed a narrow avenue on the outskirts of the wholesale district I stopped with a pleasurable thrill. A short distance from the corner I had espied one of those ancient bookstores, one I was sure I had never visited before—a narrow frame storeroom tucked well back between two brick buildings.

I had no particular plans for the evening; already it was growing dark, it was cold, and there was a brisk flurry of snowflakes. I entered the haven which had come to my attention so opportunely.

The place was dimly lighted, but I could see that I stood amidst a profusion of books that reposed on shelf and floor alike. There was no one in the front part of the store, but from a rear room came a rattle of pans; so I guessed an evening meal was in progress. Quietly I browsed around amidst the topsy-turvy miscellany, and must have become oblivious to time; for very suddenly there came a little shrill voice close to my ear:

"There is perhaps some special book?"

Startled, I spun around.

There beside me and peering up into my face was absolutely the strangest little man I had ever seen. To say that he was *tiny* would be the literal truth, for he couldn't have stood a great deal over four feet. His skin was smooth and tight, and of a color that could only be described as slate-gray; furthermore, his absurd dome of a head was entirely bald, there being not even the slightest vestige of an eyebrow! And in all my life I had never seen anything half so black as those eyes that stared up into mine as he asked again: "There is perhaps some special book?"

I laughed uneasily.

"You startled me," I said. "Why, no, nothing in particular—just looking around. Thought maybe I could find something to take home with me this evening."

He did not speak; he only made a slight bow and motioned me to go ahead. As I moved amidst the mélange of books I was aware that the little man's eyes followed my every move; and though his expression hadn't changed, I thought he was watching me with something like amusement.

My eyes moved over the titles, missing none, for there are certain books I always look for, however remote my chances of ever finding any of them. But now, as I surveyed the books about me, I saw that there was no order of arrangement at all: fiction, biography, science, history, religion, technical—all were confusedly interspersed.

For perhaps five minutes more I

searched, before giving it up as a hopeless task; for I hadn't too much time to spend there seeking for what I wanted.

The little man hadn't moved, and now he was smiling, not unfriendlily.

"I am very much afraid, sir, that you will never find what you are looking for."

I had become somewhat impatient, so I said frankly:

"I agree with you there; I never saw such a mess as this."

"Oh, I have just moved in here," he explained, still smiling, "and have not had much time to arrange things in their proper order."

I had surmised as much. I said I would drop in later, and started for the door.

He placed a hand on my arm.

"But wait. You misconstrued my meaning when I said you would never find what you are looking for. I was not referring to the disarrangement of my books."

I merely raised my eyebrows, and he went on:

"I hope you won't be too astonished,

"My mind reeled out against the booming monody of the stars."

Doctor Wycherly, when I assure you that I am quite aware that there are certain remote books you would give much to own—or even to read. Are there not? And remote as these books are, remote as your chances are, you do nevertheless entertain a hope that perhaps some day, by some lucky chance, you might come into possession of one of them. Is it not true?"

In my amazement I answered both his questions at once, hardly knowing that I spoke:

"Why—yes; indeed yes."

His bald head bobbed benignly, and he waved toward the haphazard piles of books around us.

"And these?" he emphasized in that shrill voice. "These? Phfft! they are rubbish, they are nothing! You will not find there what you seek!"

I was astonished at his vehemence. "Probably not," I murmured vaguely. "But you—just now—you mentioned my name, and I was not aware that you knew me. Would you mind explaining——"

"Ah, yes, you are puzzled, of course. You are wondering how I came to know your name. That, sir, is entirely inconsequential. Even more so do you wonder how I could possibly know of that secret desire of yours, the desire to peruse those so-called 'forbidden books' which speak of the unthinkable things of evil—the books which are, now, so inaccessible as to be indeed forbidden. Suffice it to say, for the present, that I cannot help but know of your delvings into subjects of the weird and terrible, because—well, because it is most imperative to me that I should know; therefore, I know. But I think you will agree that your quest for such books is a rather hopeless one! The various versions of Alhazred's *Necronomicon,* Flammarion's *Atmosphere,* Von Junzt's *Nameless Cults,* Kane's *Magic and Black Arts,* Eibon's *Book,* and the mysterious *King in Yellow*—which, if it does indeed exist, must transcend them all—none of these will you find lying around in bookstores. Even those few that are known to be in existence are under lock and key. Of course there are other, lesser sources, but even they are not easy to procure. For example, you probably had a difficult time in locating that later edition of the *Nameless Cults* which you now have in your possession; and criminally expurgated as it is, I imagine you find it very unsatisfactory."

"Yes, I do!" I admitted breathlessly. I was surprized to have come across a person possessed of such evident familiarity with this *recherché* literature. "The *Nameless Cults* which I have," I went on to explain, "is the comparatively recent 1909 edition, and it is puerile in the extreme. I should like very much to get hold of one of the originals: published in Germany, I believe, in the early eighteen-hundreds."

But he waved that peremptorily aside.

"What of the *Necronomicon,*" he said, "that most fearsome and most hinted-at of all the forbidden books: you would give much for a glimpse into that?"

"That," I smiled, "is even beyond my fondest hope!"

"And if I were to tell you that I have here in this very shop the original *Necronomicon?*"

I did not bat an eyelash. "You haven't," I stated positively.

He looked not at me, but beyond me.

"True, I have not," he said at last. "I thought you would consider that statement an absurdity." He sighed, then went on a bit hurriedly: "And yet I wonder if you can imagine an even greater absurdity—a book even more terrible than the dreaded *Necronomicon,* a book so ominous in its scope as to make the *Necronomicon* seem as tame as—as——"

"As a cook-book," I supplied jocularly, for the tiny man had become almost amusingly solemn and serious now.

"Yes. A book that tells of things the mad Arab never dreamed of in his wildest nightmares; indeed, a book not even of this Earth; a book that goes back to the very beginning and beyond the beginning; that comes from the very minds of the things that caused all things!"

I looked at him with a sudden suspicion, then smiled cynically. "Are you trying to tell me that you do *not* have the *Necronomicon* but you do have such a book as you describe?"

His eyes held mine for a moment, and just for that moment there was a gleam in them.

Said he: "Do you dare to let me show you?"

Said I: "Yes, do show me, by all means!"

"Very well. Please wait here a moment."

I WAITED, doubtfully enough, and for the first time mused upon the really extraordinary aspect of the thing. I suddenly remembered a story I had read a while back, something about a man who had entered an old bookshop and was plunged into an orbit of strange adventures—something to do with vampires. I was disturbed that this story should leap to my mind at this particular time, but I smiled at the thought of anything untoward happening to me; this little slate-colored man was a quite peculiar person indeed, but he did not conform to my conception of a vampire.

He returned just then, bearing an immense book nearly half as big as he was.

"You must understand," he said, "that what I am going to tell you should not be taken as skepticism. It is important that you should know certain things about this book"—he hugged it tightly to him—"that will seem to you incredible. First, you should be informed that it does not belong to me, nor to anyone on this Earth either: that is the first incredible thing you must believe. If I were to tell you truly to whom it belongs, I would have to say—to the cosmos, and to all ages that were, and are, and will yet be. It is the most damnable book in the universe, and but for it, I—but no, I will not tell you that now. I will only say now that I am the guardian of it, the present guardian, and you could never imagine what terrible transits of time and space I have made."

Can you blame me for edging toward the door? Can you blame me for wanting to get away from there? There had been a growing suspicion in my mind that this man was mad, and now I knew it. But I said, precisely because I didn't know what else to say:

"And you want to sell me this book?"

He peered at me more intently. "It could not be bought for all the wealth of this or any other planet. No, I merely want you to read it. I am most anxious that you read it. You may take it home with you if you wish. You see, I am aware that in spite of your skepticism you are consumed with curiosity."

He was right. And yet why did I hesitate? There was something very queer about all this, something that did not appear on the surface, something subtle and almost frightening. So far he had hinted at much, but had told me exactly nothing. He was far too ready to let me take this book away with me, and something told me that if he were so anxious to have me read it I would do best by not doing so.

"No, thanks," I muttered, and didn't try to conceal a shiver as I turned away.

I had had enough. His eyes were too black. But he had seemed to anticipate my refusal, and at the door he again gripped my arm.

"You may as well know," he said, "that if you had not come here I would sooner or later have brought the book to you. Knowing what I do know of you and your occult studies, it follows that you are the logical one to be entrusted with this volume. I realize that I have only hinted at things and have told you nothing, but I cannot do more than that now. You must read the book; then you will understand."

My hand on the door, I hesitated one fateful moment. In that moment the book came from under his arm and he pressed it upon me most eagerly, half shoving me out the door into the dusk of the approaching night; and there I stood with that ponderous volume in my hands, mystified, half angry, yet daring to hope that at last I was in possession of something momentous. With a half-laugh and a shrug, I turned homeward.

2

MY HOPES were more than confirmed, as I soon ascertained in the privacy of my rooms. The book was huge—the size of a large ledger, and very thick, the covers edged all around with metal. The binding was of a black faded fabric unfamiliar to me, and the yellowed pages proved also to be of some strange, resilient texture. The pages were covered with strange, angular symbols, long and narrow and strictly perpendicular. I looked for a key-word, or key-symbol, but there was none; so I stared at the pages, wondering how I was to decipher them.

And then a strange thing happened, which was to be only the first of many strange events that evening. As I stared and continued to stare at those bewildering pages I thought I saw one of the symbols move, ever so slightly; and as I peered intently at the page it became apparent that the symbols did indeed move as my eyes ran across the lines—rearranging themselves ever so minutely, writhing and twisting like so many tiny snakes. And with this queer writhing movement I no longer wondered at the meaning of those symbols, for they became suddenly clear and vivid and meaningful, impressing themselves upon my consciousness as so many words and sentences. I knew that I had indeed stumbled upon something very great.

The book seemed to exude an invisible aura of evil which at first unnerved me and then pleased me, and I determined to lose no time in plunging into my task.

Seated at one end of a library table, I spread the book before me and pulled a lamp nearer. So, comforted by a blazing log fire at my right, I turned to the very first page and began the most fantastic, I might almost say insane, document I have ever read; yet in consequence of what happened, I can never be sure whether it was the document or I who was insane.

But here it is, almost word for word as I so clearly remember it:

*PREFACE*
*to the most Damnable Book*
*ever loosed*
*upon an unsuspecting Cosmos*

Whoso comes in possession of this book should be warned, and this Preface is to serve that purpose. The possessor of this book should be wise to flee from it—but will not. His curiosity is already aroused, and reading even these few words of warning, he will not be deterred from reading on; and reading on, he will be enmeshed, become a part of the Plot, and will learn too late that there is left but a single sorrowful alternative of escape.

Such is the awful damnability of it. But how *They* must chuckle with glee!

Know, then, whoso should read this,

that I, Tlaviir of Vhoorl, do hereby subscribe the history and origin of the Book, so that all manner of men in all time to come may consider carefully before succumbing to the curiosity that is inherent in all men throughout the universe. I had no such warning; and by reason of my folly am fated to be the first guardian. I myself know not—yet—what that may portend; for, try as I might, I cannot forget my friend, Kathulhn, who all unknowingly launched this horrible jest of the gods, and the fate that was his.

Kathulhn had always been something of a puzzle to all who knew him, except, perhaps, to me. Even as a boy he had professed an insatiable wonderment of those profound mysteries of time and space which the Wise Men of Vhoorl said were not for mere man to know or to seek out.

Kathulhn could not understand why this should be.

We grew up together and entered the university together, and there Kathulhn became such an avid student of the sciences, particularly of complex mathematics, that he was a perpetual astonishment to the professors.

We left the university together, I to enter into my father's business, and Kathulhn, having been awarded an assistant-professorship, to continue with certain of his studies.

I can never understand why he confided in me as he would in no one else, unless it was because I listened to his theories with true seriousness. I was fascinated by certain of his lines of thought. Nevertheless, I cannot but admit that he sounded rather wild at times.

"Here we are," he would say, vibrantly, "tiny motes upon the surface of the planet Vhoorl, deep in the twenty-third nebula. The great scientists have told us that much as to our present locality. But what of our destination—the *ultimate?* Here we have our spinning planet, our revolving system, our drifting nebula—but one among millions that go to make what we call *the* universe—*a* universe we should say, for it is only a particle, rushing onward with other particles—whither? and to what destiny? and for what purpose? . . . For *whose* purpose, perhaps we should say.

"And are we never to know; must we remain ever chained to this miserable little planet? I think not, Tlaviir. Man in a million years may master the stars. But that will not come in my time; and I cannot wait; and besides, my greed is greater than mere mastery of stars. Look, Tlaviir: suppose that one could discover a way to project himself out, not among the stars, but *beyond—outside of the cosmic globe of stars!* To attain a point entirely outside . . . from there to watch the working of the cosmic dust in the fluid of time. Why, *there is no time,* after all, is there?—must not *space* and *time* be one and the same thing, co-existent and correlative, one to the other? Do you not see? And to project one's self quite outside of it—would not *that* be the realization of our vaunted immortality? And rest assured, *there is a way.*"

I COULD not quite digest this fantastic bit of reasoning, but did not deny the possible truth of his theories. There were several old books to which he often made reference, and I think it was these books which caused his theorizing at times to take a somewhat tangential trend:

"What of those superstitions, Tlaviir, that have come down to us from the ancients who inhabited Vhoorl eons ago? And why must we say *superstitions* and *myths?* Why must man scoff at that which he cannot understand? It is only logical that these *superstitions* and *myths* had a definite reason for being: my perusal of certain ancient manuscripts has

convinced me of that. Who knows?—perhaps probing fingers from *outside* reached in and touched Vhoorl ages ago, thus giving rise to those tales that we know very well could not have had birth in mere imagination. That, Tlaviir, is why I sometimes think I may be wrong in seeking the way outside; perhaps it were best for man not to try: he might learn things that it is best not to know."

But these latter reflections of his came only seldom. More often he would show me sheafs of paper covered with calculations, and others filled with geometrical drawings, infinite angles and curves such as I had never before seen, some of which seemed so diabolically distorted as to leap from the paper out at me! When he would try to explain his calculus I was never quite able to follow his reasoning beyond a certain point, although his explanation plus his enthusiasm made it all seem quite logical.

So far as I was able to grasp it, there exists an almost infinite number of space-dimensions, some of which impinge on our own and might be used as catapults if one could but penetrate the invisible and tenuous boundary between our space and these hyper-spaces. I had never given much credence to any dimensions beyond our familiar three, but Kathulhn seemed very certain.

"There must be a way, Tlaviir. I have ascertained that beyond doubt. And I am sure now that I am working toward the correct solution. I shall find it before long."

Aye, he found it. He found it indeed, and went further than any mortal has ever gone or will ever go again. He could not have known. . . .

It was but shortly after my last conversation with him that he disappeared, without trace or reason; was given up as dead, and even I, to whom he had confided all his hopes, did not suspect that I was ever to see him again. But I did.

It was twenty long years later when Kathulhn returned as suddenly as he had gone; came direct to me. The marvel of it is that he looked not a day older than when I had last seen him, those twenty long years ago! But the years had lain heavily on me, and Kathulhn seemed shocked at the change.

He told me his story.

"I succeeded, Tlaviir. I knew I was on the right track with my calculus, but it might have gone for nought had I not interpreted a certain passage from one of those ancient books; it was a sort of incantation, the very essence of evil, which opened the door when spoken in correlation with my dimension calculus. The purport of this incantation I cannot tell you now, but it should have warned me that the thing I was doing was for no good. Nevertheless, I dared; I had already gone too far to turn back.

"I carried the thing through, feeling a little foolish perhaps, only hoping, but not knowing, that this was the combination I had so long sought for. For a moment it seemed that nothing had happened, and yet I was aware of a change. Something had happened to my vision; things were blurred, but were rapidly emerging into a clear grotesquerie of impossible angles and planes.

"But before this vision could become quite definite, I was jerked outward, Tlaviir; out beyond the curvature of space, out into the space beyond space where even light turns back upon itself because of the non-existence of time! All things ceased: sight and sound, time and dimension and comparison. There was left to me only an awareness, but an awareness infinitely more acute than our mere physical one. I—I was Mind!

"As to *Them*—now I know, Tlaviir, and it is even as I feared. They are not

to be imagined as Beings, or Things, or anything familiar to us—no word is adequate. They are forces of pure Evil, the source of all the evil that ever was, and is, and will be! Sometimes They reach in. There is a purpose."

Kathulhn's hand brushed his forehead.

"There is much—so very much, Tlaviir. All is not as clear as it was. But I am beginning to remember! I am beginning. . . . I think those entities of Evil were *amused,* Tlaviir—with a kind of amusement I cannot now understand. Amused, perhaps, that I should have managed to come out there among Them. Assuredly no mere *being* had ever done that before. I realize now that had They wished, They could have uttered a *word* that would have blasted and annihilated me. Had They wished! Instead, They kept me among Them. There was something—something about Their amusement.

"Do you remember a certain conversation of long ago, Tlaviir, wherein I said that our universe was but a particle among other particles, rushing away somewhere, on to some destiny, for some —*purpose?* Do you remember also that I said perhaps it was best that man should not know—certain things?

"I have learned many things, Tlaviir, things that I now wish I did not know. Monstrous things. Whence the Cosmos came . . . and why . . . and its ultimate destiny—not a pleasant one. Most horrible of all is that I am beginning to *remember* . . . rites . . . performed by those Evil Ones . . . rites involving the Cosmos in a most diabolic way. . . .

"I could not even wonder at my presence out There. All was Mind and Mind was all. It would seem that I was large among Them—wilfully one of Them—assisting in certain of those colossal rites —partaking of Their evil joy. But at one and the same time, by some unexplainable and inconceivable ultracircumstance, it seemed that I was aloof and insignificant, a spectator of only some small part of the whole. It seemed that I mingled there among Them for countless millenniums, but again it seemed but the smallest fraction of what we call 'time'.

"But now—now I know that They merely toyed with me awhile, as a child toys with and then tires of a new plaything. They thrust me back, Tlaviir, and here I am upon Vhoorl again. At first I thought I had awakened from a very bad dream, but it didn't take me long to discover that Vhoorl had traveled twenty years upon its destined path during those many millenniums, or those few seconds, that I was in that timeless place!"

"And you will go back again?" I asked eagerly, for by his very sincerity I believed his story.

"I cannot, even if I would, nor can any mortal again. They have closed the route now for all time, and it is well so.

"To Them, as I have said, I was but a moment's amusement, but not too insignificant, for all that—because They gave me warning! They thrust me back, and this was the warning: if ever I made known to another mortal the slightest of the secrets I had learned, or mentioned any part or purpose of the awful rites I had seen enacted, my soul would be shattered into a million fragments and these tortured fragments scattered shrieking throughout the entire Cosmos! That is why, Tlaviir, I dare not tell you more than I have. More and more memory floods in upon me, but I dare not speak of things.

"Because—I know that *They can reach in!*"

FROM that day neither Kathulhn nor I again mentioned his sojourn "outside". For a long time I could not forget

the things he had hinted at, but how terrible must have been that which he did not—dared not—tell!

Several years passed, and the whole thing became more or less a myth in my mind. But not so with Kathulhn, it was easy to see. The twenty years that had ignored him now reached out malign fingers and took their toll. Vexation, discontent, restless broodings of the mind, all served to change him pitiably.

He came to me then, one day, and broached the thought that had been preying upon him. He could not, he said, remain silent longer. He was sick of the blind groping of men after knowledge. It lay in his power to give them the answers to cosmic secrets which they had sought out slowly for years—and things besides, of which they had never guessed. And, terrible though those secrets were, man should know all. Thoughts and memories crowding upon Kathulhn's tortured brain screamed for outlet, and there was but one resource: he had determined to write down the history of his adventure "outside", to tell of all the things he had experienced and learned.

As to the warning which the Entities of evil had given him, it was nothing. Years had gone by, Kathulhn reasoned, and surely They must have forgotten; we were puny, and They reckoned with universes.

I did not demur. Like Kathulhn, now that the years had passed I felt that the warning of those Outer Ones was a little thing.

Thus was the beginning of the jest.

. . . Never can I forget that night when doom descended upon the city of Bhuulm. I had left the city but a few hours before, accompanying one of my caravans into the near neighboring town, access to which led through a tortuous passage in the encircling mountain range. The passage was made without mishap, and, my business transacted, I was hurrying homeward, alone, and was well into the mountains when that strange darkness descended so mysteriously and prematurely. Shortly thereafter I saw the long livid streamer that came flickering out of space, to hesitate a moment and then dart out of sight directly behind the range ahead of me.

I spurred hurriedly forward, already with a feeling of disaster.

When I finally pushed through the passage and came in sight of the city, the streamer was gone and everything was quiet with a stillness that seemed to shriek in agony to the pale stars peering fearfully down.

I entered the city and came upon a person groveling in the street, and when I bent to help him he seemed not to see me, but shrieked, over and over again, something about the "shape" that had come slithering down the streamer. He lapsed then into a drooling insanity, and I left him lying there and passed on into the heart of the city.

It was not long before full unhallowed horror burst upon me. The entire populace had been rendered not only gibberingly insane, but stark blind. Some lay quite still in the streets, in merciful oblivion; some still writhed and mouthed unintelligibly of the thing that had descended to blast their minds and their sight, and others groped pitifully about, dazed and whimpering.

I rushed to the house of my friend Kathulhn, but already I knew I was too late. I found what I had expected: he was dead. But his body, as I gazed on it, was scarcely recognizable as the one I had known. It was entirely covered with tiny blue perforations, gruesomely suggestive. His limbs were horribly distorted and broken. His eyes had been torn from their sockets, and two great holes gaped in his face from which

something oozed. And his lips were drawn back in such a frozen, exaggerated grin that I turned quickly away.

Scattered about in profusion were loose pages upon which I recognized my friend's fine writing. Well did I know what that writing was and what it portended; and in a sudden insane frenzy I gathered them all up, stuffed them into my clothes and fled from there in precipitate horror.

I CROSSED the three great oceans of Vhoorl, and after many mishaps reached the Abhorred Continent of Dluuhg. I ascended the tortuous Inner Mountains and descended into the lowlands fraught with those creatures supposed to have passed from the face of Vhoorl eons ago. Slowly, relentlessly, I thrust my perilous way forward; and finally, half dead from hurt and fatigue, reached my objective: the half-mythical city of a mysterious and fanatical priest-like sect so secluded that only the veriest rumors of its existence ever reached the outer realms of Vhoorl.

I was taken in and my wounds were ministered to; for all are welcomed and none are questioned who manage to reach there.

So it was, that in the quietude of my temporary quarters in that deep-hidden city, I dared finally to delve into the secret linings of my clothes and bring out those pages which Kathulhn had written before doom descended upon him. Arranging them in their sequence, I saw that Kathulhn had been allowed to finish his treatise. And somehow this fact was more profoundly disturbing than if he had been suddenly cut off before he could finish.

Tremulously I began to read, and was immediately absorbed. But before long I encountered Kathulhn's first few hints of the cosmic horrors to be revealed, and I began to waver. I read on . . . a few more pages . . . I became appalled and frightened. . . . I lost heart then, would have ceased reading, would have destroyed those pages for all time—but found to my unutterable horror that I could not! A will that was not my own compelled me to read on . . . all things around me ceased to exist . . . I was no longer bound to Vhoorl but was drawn, sensually if not bodily, into the very midst of those mad pages. . . .

Far into the night and into the morning hours, mind reeling, soul recoiling, I perused those all-revealing pages which moved relentlessly but surely toward a final, culminating immensity which froze my brain.

A sullen dawn was looming when I finished that terrible treatise and screamed curses upon all the gods that were—for then I *knew!* Fool, fool that I was! Fool to have thought that the tiny globe of Vhoorl or the entire cosmic sphere itself could contain any place of hiding from *Them!* Fool not to have destroyed those pages utterly, unread! But it was too late; the eternal dirge of all mankinds: "Too late!" I had succumbed to that deadly and avaricious arch-enemy, curiosity. I had read, and was utterly and damnably doomed!

AND NOW, as if in answer to my imprecations there came a mocking chuckle of amusement as if from far away, and then nearer, riding down the star wind, faint and clear . . . a peculiar sibilance and a shifting as if every individual atom in the planet of Vhoorl had been deviated infinitesimally from its path . . . intense cold . . . a kind of livid glare that burst suddenly, filling all the room about me . . . and then——

I think I tried to shriek, but each succeeding attempt rose to a certain point in my throat and stopped. How can I con-

vey the soul-shattering horror of that moment when, from the nothingness before me, there emerged a thing, a sort of shapeless, writhing mass, greenish and fluorescent, tangible and *sentient*—indescribable because it was constantly changing, fading away at the edges as if it were but a projection reaching through from some other space or dimension. In that moment I remembered those words Kathulhn had said to me: "Because I know, Tlaviir, that *They can reach in!*" In that moment I knew what manner of thing confronted me . . . knew that this was the "shape" that had descended upon the city of Bhuulm those many months ago, to blast all intelligence. . . .

I knew that I must shriek to save my mind; tried again and again but could not; and then as I closed my eyes against the blinding brilliance of it and felt my mind slipping slowly away, there seemed to emanate from the thing a radiance to touch my brain with a soothing coolness. The first icy wave of horror passed over me and left me calm with that utter impassivity born of hopelessness.

So it was that there in the cold dawn of that nameless city I listened to the pronouncement of the doom that was to be mine.

I say "listened", but there was no sound. The thing was polychromatic, with an interplay of colors many of which I was certain were alien to this universe. And with every scintillating change of color, thought was sent pulsing into my brain.

The fate reserved for me [the thing scintillated] was not to be as Kathulhn's, nor as those other unfortunates' back in the city of Bhuulm; for I was the very keynote upon which They based their jest. Not until the person whom I knew as Kathulhn had found the way Out There, had They ever so much as suspected the existence of such animalia on the tiny spheres. Observing closely, then, They discovered that many of the spheres abounded with such creatures, and They were amused at the colossal impudence of this one. Probing Kathulhn's mind, They discovered that it was his inherent curiosity which had made him seek for the answers to galactic secrets and finally to find the way Out There. This phenomenon of *curiosity,* or *aspiration,* They discovered, was a universally inherent quality of these animalia. Furthermore, it was a quality of *good* to which They, being forces of pure *evil,* were opposed.

Then it was that They conceived their jest.

They thrust Kathulhn back upon Vhoorl with that dire warning which he had almost whispered to me. To Them, who were timeless and therefore omnipresent, the phenomena which Kathulhn knew as "past" and "future" were as one.

*They had foreseen that Kathulhn would not heed that warning!*

And [the thing went on] knowing well the fate that had been his, I had had every opportunity to destroy those pages he had written. *But it was foreseen, indeed fore-ordained, that I should read!* And now those pages would never be destroyed. I would bind them well, into a book that would be imperishable all through the ages, and upon that book They would cast a curse to await any who dared to peruse it. And as a stimulant to this gigantic scheme of the Outer Ones, conceived by Them for Their own amusement, I must preface the Book with a warning to all mankinds. Then let him disregard the warning who dared. Reading on, there could be no turning back; he would be compelled to read on to the end, and upon him would devolve the curse. Only when such a one had dared, would I be free.

As to the curse [the thing continued] and my immediate fate, he was undeter-

mined. Perhaps he would take me out There. Such things as *aspiration* and *emotion* and *mind* in connection with the tiny motes They had newly discovered on the spheres, had aroused a transient interest, and experiments would be entertaining.

* * * * *

Such diabolism only those Entities could conceive. The thing has gone now, as I, Tlaviir, conclude this preface of warning; but I feel that I have written these words under a pervading surveillance. From infinitely far away, now, I seem to hear unleashed shouts of glee . . . or is that only my imagination? But no: very close to my ear now, as I write these final words, comes that penetrant and portentous chuckle which I know is not imagination, to remind me that this which I write, everything, all, is but a part of Their preconceived plan.

3

THE BOOK lay there, opened wide, flat on the table before me. Thus had the Preface ended, on the left-hand page; the page opposite it was blank—and there were many pages following.

For a long time I sat there in the absolute stillness of the room, pondering, full of amazement at what I had just read, wondering what evil secrets might be revealed in those following pages. Even the things hinted at in the Preface were suggestive enough. I recalled with a start how anxious that tiny slate-colored man had been for me to read the Book—and I wondered if, indeed, the curse would be transferred to me if I dared to turn the page and read on.

Abruptly I came to my senses, with a little laugh. "Nonsense!" I said aloud to the room; "what am I thinking of? Such things as that can't be!"

My hand reached out to turn the page. . . .

The log in the fireplace snapped sharply. I arose to replenish the fire, noticing as I did so that the clock on the mantel said twenty minutes until midnight. For the first time I was aware of the chill that had crept into the room.

As I turned from my task I saw that tiny man of the bookstore standing very quietly there beside the table.

Now by all rules of propriety I should have been shocked or astounded or scared—later I wondered why I hadn't been; but right then I wasn't any of those things. I should at least have done him the courtesy of inquiring how he had learned my address, or how he had managed to enter my room, the very solid door of which I had most decidedly locked! . . . but right then as I turned and faced him I only seemed to think how very appropriate this all was . . . that he should be there, so very opportunely . . . there were several of the most deucedly puzzling points about the Book that I should like to clear up. Oh, I knew of course that all this was nothing but a dream, knew that that was why it was so illogical!

The little man spoke first, in answer, as it were, to the very first question I had been about to propound.

"No, I am not that Tlaviir whose warning you have just read," he said with a monotony that suggested an infinite weariness of repetition. "The fact is, we may never know how many eons ago this diabolic thing began; that very part of the cosmos where the Book had its origin may long since have passed into oblivion. But, for all of that, neither am I of your world. It was ages ago on my own planet, the very location of which I have long forgotten, that the

Book came to me in much the same way it has come to you—brought to me by a queer person not of my own planet, who had traversed the ages and the outer spaces with the Book. I was an avid student of the vaguely hinted-at, premundane creatures supposed to have inhabited my world before it swam into light out of the darkness. Just as you have read, so did I read—eagerly. And just as you now doubt—appalled at the thought of the immensity that *might* be—so did I doubt. As you now hesitate before the Book—so did I hesitate. But in the end——"

I gestured impatiently at the thought he was trying to suggest to me. Whatever kind of hoax this was, it was silly. True, I had always been an imaginative person, my library consisting of the weirdest literature ever written, but always deep in my mind was the safe and comfortable knowledge that it *was* literature and nothing more. But now—to ask me to believe that upon this Book had been placed a curse, to be transferred to him who read . . . that it had come here through space and through the ages from some alien planet . . . *brought* here by this man who claimed he was not of this world—that was too much. It was much too much. That is the stuff of which fiction is made.

So thinking, I once more reached out toward the Book. But—thank God!—my hand recoiled in horror as those queer, writhing symbols upon the open page met my eye with a significance that jerked my mind back to a semblance of reason: for I saw that those symbols *were not, could not be, of this earth!*

I felt myself suddenly trembling as all my assurance vanished in an instant—trembling as my taut mind suddenly sensed *things* lurking, out of sight and sound, but very near. . . .

THE tiny man had watched my movements with an intense expectancy and eagerness, and as my hand recoiled his whole being bespoke disappointment and temporary defeat. But this was only for an instant, and then he, too, seemed to sense some invisible presence close at hand—stood poised, very still, head erect as if listening to something that I could not hear, something I was not meant to hear. For just a moment he stood thus before he spoke again; and now his voice, as he went on, was weary once more and sad:

"Yes, you had persisted in believing that all of this was some kind of hoax—but now, even as all the others, you know differently. You delight in delving into the weird and terrible, and I had hoped that you would be the one. . . . But it has always been thus.

"On the outermost planet of your system, that which you call Pluto, I encountered a denizen who, like yourself, was intensely interested in the ancient and dreadful superstitions of his planet. He also read the Preface that you have just read; he too wavered with that dread uncertainty, but his courage failed him and he fled from me and the Book as he would have fled from a plague, and so I knew that once again I had failed in this grotesquerie, that not yet was I to be free from the curse. But it has been so long, and nowhere can I escape those tortures of mind and soul which *They* inflict upon me at their will! For it is from *Them* that I derive the immunity to the terrors of outer space, and that hitherto unsuspected Power of darkness which transcends by far the power of light, by which I am enabled to traverse the space between planets and between galaxies. But no single moment, no single thought of my own!

"You cannot know the horror of that! Sometimes in the middle of night They

project a blasphemous Shape upon me, whose toothless mouth opens and closes in an obscene, soundless sound, who sits on my chest to perform a grotesque rite during which my very identity is lost in the churning of chaotic confusion and my mind reels out amidst the booming monody of the stars, on out into that boundless abyss beyond the outermost curved rim of cosmic space, where They dwell in contemplation of a monstrous catastrophe to the cosmos; nay, it is more than a contemplation, the thing has begun, is being done now, and out There I have assisted in this thing, the very immensity of which would drive one mad who knew. I would welcome madness, but They will not even let me go mad!"

His voice, ordinarily thin and shrill, had reached a penetrating shriek.

"But," I said at last in a sort of triumph, "if you are so anxious for me to read this Book, these very things you tell me defeat your purpose—if this whole crazy thing is not a dream, which I believe it is!"

He almost reeled as he put his hand to his head. "That is because you do not know the malign cunning of Them who conceived this plot. My very thoughts, the words I speak, come from Them! I am Theirs!"

An almost imperceptible pause during which he again seemed to listen to that which I could not hear, and he continued:

". . . but consider well . . . the Book reveals secrets which can be yours . . . knowledge of which you have scarcely dared to dream . . . why, you have not even thought to connect that 'Kathulhn' mentioned in the Preface with that tentacled and ever-damned *Kthulhu* reputed to have come to Earth eons ago by way of the planet Saturn to which it had previously fled from depths beyond your solar system . . . you can know whence obscure and loathsome Tsathoqquah came, and why . . . and other obscenities of subhuman legend hinted at in your *Necronomicon* and other forbidden books: N'hyarlothatep, and Hastur, and the abominable Mi-Go; frightful and omniscient Yok-Zothoth, ponderous and proboscidian Chaugnar Faugn, and Beh'-Moth the Devourer . . . you will converse with the Whisperer in Darkness . . . you will know the meaning of the Affair that shambleth in the stars, and will behold the hunters from Beyond . . . you will learn the very source of those Hounds of Tindalos who dwell in a chaotic, nebular universe at the very rim of space, and who are in league with those Outer Ones . . . all of these things, with which you are vaguely familiar through your readings, will you know—and much more. In the pages of the Book, which go beyond the very beginning, are revealed secrets which the wildest flights of your imagination cannot begin to comprehend . . . your mind, now such a puny thing, will expand to encompass that entire infinite arcanum of all matter, and you *may* learn in what manner the entire cosmos was spewed forth by an evil thought in the mind of a monstrous Thing in the Darkness . . . you will see that this cosmos which we consider infinite is but an atom in Their infinity, and you will behold the appalling *position* of our cosmos in that larger infinity, and the obscene rites in which it plays an integral part . . . you will know the histories of suns and nebulæ, and yours will be the power of bodily transposition between planets, or even to galaxies so remote that their light has not yet reached Earth. . . ."

How can I describe those few minutes—his shrill voice going relentlessly on, the book lying open there on the table betwen us, the flames in the fireplace throwing flickering shadows about the room; I standing there stiffly erect,

one hand on the table, mind reeling, trying to grasp the great magnitude of these things he was telling me and trying to weigh, one against the other, what I dared to believe and what I feared to believe!

And all the time he was speaking his head was held in that position which made me think he was listening . . . listening . . . for what? And his gaze as he talked was not fixed on me, but over my shoulder at the mantel where rested the clock. . . . Once while he was speaking I had slid my hand forward on the table, slowly, to almost touch the book, but an almost imperceptible change in the timbre of his voice made me draw my hand back. And all during his rambling sentences—whether it was the bewildering effect of his words on my brain, or not, I shall never know—I seemed to sense more and more clearly the presence of those invisible forces lurking near by, and they, too, seemed to be waiting. . . .

He was no longer speaking. I was not aware of when exactly he had stopped speaking; I only knew that I was no longer listening to his voice, but was listening for something else—something—I knew not what. I only knew that we were not alone in that room, and that the time had not yet come, but was near. So I listened for that which I could not quite hear, and stared again, fascinated, at the Book that lay there on the table between us. . . .

He saw that fascination.

"Read," he whispered fervently, bending toward me. "You know you want to read. You *want* to read."

Yes, I *wanted* to read. More and more was that fact forcing itself upon me. What sane man could believe that this Book had such menacing connections as he had hinted? But I was past being sure that I was a sane man. If I believed this story, I was assuredly not sane; if I did not believe, why did I hesitate?

Again his whisper: "You *want* to read."

His almost imploring tone caused me to recoil from the Book in horror. But the fascination had not left me, and I could not utter the emphatic "no!" that had risen to my tongue. Instead, I looked quickly, a little wildly, about the room, into the corners, anywhere except into that little man's eyes; for I suddenly knew that to do so would be fatal.

Those unseen forces seemed to fill the room now. I could feel a definite tumult, a sort of surging to and fro, faint sounds of fury as of a mounting hostility between two opposing groups; a growing but unseen confusion of which I was the center. Into my mind flashed the thought that there was no little gray man, and no Book, and that all the seeming events of the evening were but a nightmare from which I would presently awaken. But no—here I was standing in my library beside the table with that absurd little man opposite me and that growing, unseen tumult about me. Could one think thus in nightmares, I wondered? Probably not, and therefore this was no nightmare.

Close upon this illogical chain of thought came another, with a suddenness so terrifying that I knew it had not originated in my own mind; it was one of those thoughts out of nowhere. It was simply the plain and uncompromising *knowledge* that this was all real, no hoax, no farce, but that I was faced with the most stupendous thing that had ever come to this Earth, and must conquer it or be conquered; I knew, too, with a sudden wild hope, that I would not be alone in fighting it. Those forces surging ever closer about me were there for a purpose, presaged something in my favor.

I turned then with a slow deliberate-

ness and faced the tiny man who was waiting. No word was spoken as my eyes met his very black and bottomless ones. . . .

I WAS lost! Too late I knew it. Everything around me vanished as those eyes grew, expanded, became two huge pools of space black and boundless beyond all imagining. I had been caught by the suddenness of it, but with a feeble instinct I fought against those eyes which seemed to draw me. . . . But there were no longer any eyes . . . my feet were no longer on the floor . . . I was floating serenely along somewhere a million miles out in that black space . . . serenely . . . but no—I was no longer floating now; a touch had brought me back. My feet were on the floor again and I stood close against the table. But something—some part of me—seemed still to move along against my own volition. That was funny! I wanted to laugh. It was my hand that was no longer a part of me, that was creeping, crawling, sliding like some sinuous serpent across the smooth table-top . . . toward the Book!

Yes, I remembered then, in a vague sort of way. There was a book on the table, a book that lay open and waiting, a book that for some terrible reason I must not touch. What was that reason? Slowly, slowly I remembered. There was a queer little man with very black eyes, who had told me an awful fact about the book, who had wanted me to read . . . to touch it would mean that I should read . . . and read . . . no turning back. . . .

Ah, how fully did comprehension then flee back to me, through my rising panic, as I sought in vain to stay the hand that crept along the table there like some Judas that would betray its master! How that churning confusion about me did increase, warningly, sweeping around me in an undulating wave as if they, too, knew something of the panic that was upon me! How they closed in around me, those unseen forces, from behind, from all sides, purposeful, as if they would press me back away from the table, away from the menace of the Book! I almost heard tiny warning voices flitting past my ear, almost felt fingers tugging valiantly at my own, and for a moment I thought I comprehended. These forces—rallying valiantly about me—had *they* once succumbed to the Book, in ages past—countless beings from all parts of the universe—come now to aline themselves with me against the forces of the Book?

I may have guessed close to the truth—I shall never know. Nor shall I ever know by what terrific effort I finally hurled myself away from that table. I do not remember it. I only know that I stood at last supporting myself on the back of my chair, trembling in body and weak in mind; knew that the tension of that terrible moment was gone, and that the forces which had rallied around me were once again quiet, waiting. That this was but a temporary respite in the battle I well knew, and knew too that my exhausted brain could not endure another such assault.

A half-dozen feet away the Book lay face up on the table, a menacing, mocking thing. . . . Opposite it, that tiny man still stood on the selfsame spot where I had first glimpsed him in the room; in those black eyes was now a luster, a bright luster of hate for those forces which had fought with me against him—those which he must have known would come. How many times had they defeated him, I wondered! Had each of *them* once been a guardian of the Book as he was now? If ever *he* won release from the Book, would he in turn join forces with those who fought against it? Would they ever become strong enough

to defeat those Outer Ones who had conceived this entire plot?

I must not waste my strength in wondering, but prepare for the assault that must surely come again. In a sudden flash of illumination I knew that I must hold on—just a little longer—hold on until twelve o'clock. *That's* why he had watched the clock there on the mantel, over my shoulder! It must be very near the hour now, and if I could but hold on —stay away from that table—avoid those eyes—not be caught off guard again!

But how futile a thought! In that very instant the huge swimming blackness of those eyes again caught me with that fierce tenacity, again swept me up and away beyond all suns and stars, out into that vast darkness which cradles the universe. I was like a man drowning, who in a few brief seconds sees his entire past unfolded; but I saw instead my future, a future of dark terror and torture amid the vague forms and fears of that outer place. Even as I floated serenely in that terrible darkness I could seem to see those forms, those Outer Ones, indescribably repulsive for all their vagueness, peering past me with malicious glee at some drama being enacted for them as it had been how many times before! And this time *I* was a part of that drama.

And yet there seemed to be another part of me, far away and unimportant—a part of me that tried to make me see that this darkness was the illusion, not the reality—that struggled with a feeble sort of intensity to thrust this darkness away . . . how foolish! . . . how useless! . . . Now that other part of me was trying to remember—something—that had seemed important a long time ago—something to do with . . . but no—it was useless. . . .

Wait! Had not that darkness all about me suddenly shivered, like water whose smooth surface is disturbed? Again! Now fading, receding! . . .

Had not something brushed my cheek just then? Was that a whisper in my ear? A number of whispers now, eager, urgent. . . .

The blackness around me receded rapidly, dissolved into two ebony pools that fled far away into space, becoming tinier, tinier, until they stopped to peer back at me.

With a shock, I was once again back in the familiar room, felt the floor under me, stood close against the table and was gazing at the twin ebony pools that were the tiny man's eyes. But in those eyes was now something of consternation and distress! Dismay in those eyes!

As before, with no volition of mine, my hand was gliding smoothly across the table-top toward the Book. As before, that surging of unseen forces was all about me—but now there was no confusion, no haste, no panic; there was instead a kind of unseen jubilation and pulsing of triumph!

But still those flitting little voices past my ear, faint and not quite heard, but seeming to urge me in something that I could not quite grasp.

I must try to be ready for whatever would come. . . .

My hand touched the Book! It moved over the opened page. . . .

"Now! Act now, act, act!"

The hand, which before had tried to betray me, now acted in a flash. I seized the Book, whirled, and cast it straight into the blazing fire behind me.

Immediately everything about me was a wild joy of triumph, but this lasted only a moment, and then all was quiet and still. Those forces, or beings, or

whatever they were, had once more triumphed, and now were gone back to whatever realm they had come from.

But as I look back at it all now, it seems a nightmare and I cannot be sure. I am not even sure whether those words "Act now, act!" were whispered in my ear, or whether they came screaming from my own throat in the tenseness of that moment. I am not sure whether some force entirely outside of myself caused me to seize and fling that book, or whether it was a purely reflex action on my part. I had no intention of doing it.

As for that tiny man beyond the table —he did not even leap to intercept. He did not move. He seemed to become even smaller. His eyes were once more very black, but somehow pitiable, not even reflecting the fire into which he gazed. For a few seconds he stood there, the very aspect of infinite sorrow and utter hopelessness. Then, very slowly, he walked over to the fireplace and reached a thin hand, as it seemed to me, into the very flames—and from those flames picked out the Book, the age-old, parchment-like pages of which had not even burned!

OF WHAT happened next, I hesitate to write; for I can never be sure how much of it was real and how much hallucination. In my fall to the floor I must have struck my head a pretty hard wallop, for I was several days in the care of a doctor who for a while feared for my mind.

As I said, the tiny man had picked out the Book from the flames. I am sure no word was spoken. But the next thing that happened was a sound, and it was a *chuckling* sound of such portentous diabolism as I hope never to hear again, seeming to come from far away but approaching nearer and nearer until it seemed to emanate from the four walls of the room. Then came a blinding glare of light. That sounds trite, somehow, but it was exactly that; "blinding" hardly describes it, but I know of no stronger word. And it's at this point that I am not certain: I may have fallen and struck my head and become unconscious right after that glare of light, or I may really have seen what I seemed to see. I'm rather inclined to the latter belief, so vivid did it seem at the time.

How often I have read stories in which the author, attempting to describe some particularly awful thing or scene, has said: "It is beyond the power of my pen to describe"—or words to that effect. And how often I have scoffed! But I will never scoff again. There before me in that moment was the indescribable in reality!

I will, however, make a feeble attempt. What I saw or seemed to see must have been that same thing from Outside which Tlaviir described in the Preface of the Book. One moment it wasn't there and the next moment it was there. I suppose the glare of light occurred in that interval between the wasn't and the was. But there it was.

I can look back upon it now with a sort of grim humor.

It was pretty big, and seemed to be sticking through from some other space or dimension, just as the fellow had said in the Preface. It wasn't an arm, or a face, or a tentacle, or a limb of any sort, nothing but a *part,* and I wouldn't want to say what part. It was all colors and colorless, all shapes and shapeless, for the simple reason that it changed color and shape very rapidly and continually, always disappearing at the edges, not touching the floor or any part of the room.

More than that I cannot say; I had looked upon it for barely the count of one-two-three, when everything was sud-

denly black and I could not feel the floor under me at all.

But just before my mind slipped entirely away into the abyss, I heard a monstrous Word, a Name, shrieked in that shrill voice that belonged to the tiny man with the Book . . . and once again that Name shrieked in agony, shrill, faint, floating down along the star path, fainter . . . fainter. . . .

* * * * *

THE first thing I did when able to leave my bed was to pay another visit to that bookstore.

As I approached the narrow frame building, its air of utter desolation dawned upon me. I tried the door, but it was locked, and peering through a grimy window I perceived the books piled around haphazardly on the floor and on the shelves, everything covered with a gray depth of dust. That was peculiar. A curious apprehension seized me. I was sure this was the right bookstore; there could be no mistaking it.

I had considerable difficulty finding out who the owner was, but I finally located him, a tall, raw-boned, rather unkempt man.

"Oh," he said, in answer to my question, "you mean the place down on Sixth Avenue. Yes, I own the place, used to run a bookstore there; business bad, so I locked it up—all of six months ago, I reckon it was. I might make another stab at it sometime. . . . No, I've never unlocked the place since. . . . Yes, sure, of course I'm sure. . . . What? A man about four feet tall with gray skin and no eyebrows? Hell, no!"

He looked at me as though he thought I was crazy, so I didn't pursue the matter further.

But I don't think I want to read the *Necronomicon,* after all.

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# Death of the Artist

By FELIX KOWALEWSKI

Ah, long the years my soul was bound to Art—
    Lean, hungry days—and paintings none would buy.
    Now creditors pound at my door and cry,
And dull despair weighs down my faltering heart.
Enough! The poison gas floats through the room . . .
    And now my soul is free! But what is this?
    I see a multitude that bends to kiss
The carved *Hic Iacet* of a marble tomb.
Ah, who is this, to whom the heedless throng
    Such homage pays, what prince of world-wide fame?
    O, my dark soul, read me his wondrous name!
    O Muse of Art, what bitter irony!
    Alive they hound, but dead they worship me!
'Tis my poor name floats up in cadenced song!

"To escape him, she flung herself off the cliff path."

# The Dark Star

By G. G. PENDARVES

*A powerful weird tale about a lovely, beautiful girl whose life and happiness were held in thrall to an evil picture, with unutterable horror awaiting her in its cloudy depths*

ALAN CLOVA hid the winged exultant uprush of his emotion with habitual control. His face, thin to emaciation, dark and cleanly chiseled, was aloof and proud as a Pharaoh's. It was hard to believe he was only thirty. So much experience, so much hard-earned knowledge, so much resolution and critical cool judgment was in his eyes. Beneath straight black brows they gleamed, steady, brilliant and serene. Here was a man of action no less than a man of in-

tellect. Breeding, dignity, pride of race had molded the features, but they were instinct with a tense fighting awareness that was the New World's gift to the Old.

His cousin, David Wishart Clova, Earl of Glenhallion, narrowly observed his young kinsman. Hope stirred in him once more; hope he had thought was dead —dead and buried with his three sons beneath the sodden earth of Flanders. The words of the creed he had so often repeated in the little gray chapel on his estate, beat in his brain like the portentous opening bars of a tremendous symphony. *"I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come."* The words had never passed his lips since 1916, when his third and youngest son fell.

Now, looking at Alan's six feet five inches of brawn and muscle, the beliefs he had forsworn flashed up again. Here in the flesh once more was an heir to the great name, the centuries of tradition, the wild splendor of Glenhallion estates. Here, under the roof of Gorm Castle, stood a man who might well have been one of his own sons grown older, stronger, more mature. Resurrection! . . . Yes, it seemed a resurrection indeed.

Alan stood at a great window looking out over Glenhallion estate, from walled grounds about the castle to meadow, forest, craggy hills, and far-distant sky whose April blue darkened to hazy grays and purples above the Kaims of Vorangowl. His absorbed gaze traveled from point to point, then came back to rest on a square gray tower within the grounds, ivy-hung and partly obscured by beech-trees. He frowned at sight of a man who was pacing round its battlements. His appearance, a great hulking figure in outlandish-looking gray clothes, stirred a sudden cold antipathy in Alan and he turned abruptly back to the room and its two occupants.

Lady Maisry, the Earl's only surviving child, sat by a log fire. She had a fragile look and shivered now and then at sound of the wind's bluster round the castle of Gorm. She looked, Alan thought, with her golden hair and green sheath dress, as if she had been transplanted from the daffodil-beds in the grounds below.

Some unfathomable instinct of protection for her made him hesitate to speak of the man on the tower roof. He strolled back to the window. Yes, the man was there still, pacing to and fro, to and fro, a long cloak flapping in the wind, hair and beard flaming red in the evening light. Such a fury of rage shook Alan that it was a minute before he could command his voice. Then he asked, "Is that old tower a complete ruin? Or, do—do people live in it?"

Earl Glenhallion came over to the window. "Birds, bats, spiders! That's all you'll find living in the old Keep. Fine old stronghold, all that's left of the original castle; the rest was burned down about two hundred years ago. No, you'd not find man, woman, or child who'd go inside that tower for five minutes."

"I'm going."

Alan's remark had the effect of a pistol-shot on Lady Maisry. She got to her feet and moved quickly across to him, put a pleading hand on his arm.

"No—no—no! You mustn't! It's dangerous, very dangerous. There's something . . . there's someone . . . you never know if—it skips some generations! My father thinks it all nonsense, but——"

ALAN almost promised never to set foot in the tower if it worried her. The distress in her gray eyes, the frightened pallor of her cheeks shook him. She interested and gripped his imagina-

tion profoundly. Yesterday's first impressions of her were strengthened by today's. Her clear ivory-pale skin, wide gray eyes, gold thick shining hair, gentle slow ease of every movement, and above all to his critical sensitive ear, her low deliberate exquisite voice, immensely charmed him. Beyond these things, though, rare as he had found such physical perfection, he was deeply aware of a mind fully as alive and equipped as his own, of a nature as exacting, and a will as inflexible. But there was something about her that puzzled him. He had the impression of a deeply hidden preoccupation which she dreaded might be discovered.

"She looks as substantial as a dragonfly, but I believe she's made of steel covered with white velvet," he reflected. "I know that fragile-looking type of thoroughbred. She'd live through famine and earthquake—if she felt like living! I know horses and I know dogs, and that gives me a line on humans. She's letting go for some reason. And I'm going to know that reason."

All the same he found it difficult to remember she wouldn't die easily as he met her panic-stricken eyes. A grim thought struck him. Was that man on the battlements her lover?—was she hiding him there from the Earl?

"Why do you feel like that about the tower?" he asked.

Her father drew her to him, an arm about her shoulders. "She's had a queer life here in this old castle. You must forgive her fancies, Alan! The legend about that old Keep dies hard. Everyone on the estate swears by it. Maisry believes it, too."

"Just what is the legend?"

"A-a-ah! Hrumph!" The older man stalked over to the window and glowered at the gray Keep. "They say it's haunted by an ancestor of ours, who lived some two hundred years ago. He was known as the Red Earl of Glenhallion, or Red Alastair, because of his flaming red beard."

Alan felt his heart jump as if a mine had exploded under the polished flooring under foot. He tried to keep his glance from the old tower, and failed. He must look again; perhaps the setting sun had dazzled him, given a false illusion. He joined the Earl; his keen gaze followed the other's look.

A clear shaft of light struck across the glen from over the high moorland of Vorangowl and picked out the tower like a searchlight; every ivy-leaf stood out like carved metal, every irregularity of weathered stone showed up, discolorations of dripping rain from the roof, the gold patina of lichen, the rusty brown of winter leaves lodged in iron-barred windows—all was mercilessly clear.

And, on the breast-high battlemented wall that ran round the roof, a man leaned with face directly turned to Alan and the castle window at which he stood. The man's hair and beard flamed red as torchlight.

"The story of Red Alastair does us no credit," went on the Earl. "He was a wild, dissolute, savage man, from all the records. You can read him up in the library if you're interested. But as to haunting the Keep—that's nonsense, the talk of ignorant peasants, the sort of story that people like to invent about any old ruin."

"So no one lives there, no one climbs up to the roof to look round, not for any reason?" Alan's voice was harsh.

"No one. It stands there as you see it now—deserted! I've been up, of course. Jamie has the key—the only key. When I succeeded to Glenhallion there were constant scandals and wild tales because visitors were allowed to go over the Keep and explore it. I locked up the

place, and since then there've been no more tales of ghosts and people being pushed off battlements or crushed behind doors and all the rest of it. I've not been inside for a year or more, and certainly no one else has. A good specimen of Tenth Century architecture it is, and that's all. If you see Red Alastair when you go over it, let me know. I rule here now; he's had his turn and made a very bad job of it, by all accounts."

THE two men turned back to the fire, the Earl chuckling, Alan feeling more angry, more stupidly bewildered than he'd ever felt in his whole vigorous sane existence. He believed in ghosts no more than he believed in the Divine Right of kings, and he connected both illusions with forgotten centuries when people had no bathrooms, enjoyed heretic burnings in place of cinemas and night-clubs, and fought for "the Glory of God" or some such unpractical cause.

He thrust the whole thing out of his mind for future cogitation. Maisry was watching him with painful anxiety as if she divined his inner discomfort. He was determined to share it with no one, and made up his mind to investigate the Keep before he slept that night.

The events and revelations of that same evening salted his determination. In order to get the legend as it was bandied about the countryside before reading up a literary account, he tried to extract information from the close-mouthed Jamie, who valetted him as he dressed for dinner. Jamie shied away from the subject like a nervous horse from a white flapping sheet.

"It's not good to talk of *him,* not about this time of year, my lord." The man spoke the broad Scots of the countryside, and became almost unintelligible as his agitation and embarrassment increased.

Alan turned to the big swinging mirror on his dressing-table, pretending to examine his chin. He saw the reflected Jamie glance over his shoulder.

"Why at this time of year, especially?"

"Eh, my lord?—you that'll be next Earl of Glenhallion to be asking that!"

The thin dark face turned from the mirror with a smile, so pleasant and friendly a smile that the old servant relaxed to it with: "It's not you I'll be blaming, my lord; it's those that brought you up so far from your own land and kinsmen. You that were born to all this!"

"But I wasn't! When I was born, exactly seven other heirs came before me."

"It's the Earl will be telling you all the family history, him and her Ladyship. It's not for me to be havering of the gentry."

"Tell me at least why April's a bad time to discuss Red Alastair? Must a ghost be in season like grouse or blackcock?"

"Wheest, wheest for pity's sake, my lord! You can't tell what's abroad these evenings. The master hasn't 'the sight'; he could go up into the Keep this very night and not see a thing to fright him. But there's others can—aye, there's others can see! And I tell you this, my lord: the Dark Star is up over the Kaims of Vorangowl again."

"You mean the high moors at the head of the glen?"

"No. Not the moors you've seen. The star's in the Picture, the cursed thing that *he* left in the Keep. Aye, the Picture I'm meaning of the moors and the cliff where the bride he stole from another man jumped to her death."

A deep sonorous booming distracted Jamie from his confidences.

"That's the dinner gong, my lord. I'll not weary you with my tales now. It's all writ in black and white, and every word's

true, for all the master's fleering at the legend."

When he made his way down to the lofty shadow-filled dining-hall, exasperation had rubbed Alan's temper rather raw.

"Am I crazy—or am I crazy?" he demanded of himself, one hand lightly sliding over the broad baluster-rail for the sensuous pleasure of touching the lovely seasoned wood, undesecrated by varnish, worn by time. His reason was floundering and plunging in heavy seas of unfamiliar and unpalatable sensations, ideas and thoughts.

"And, so far, there's nothing in the facts to justify my going up in the air like this," he complained to himself. "Even if I did see—and most certainly I did—a red-bearded man, what of it? They exist—especially here in Scotland; it's almost the hallmark of a Scot. Maybe porridge produces red beards! Jamie's daft about his old legend. Now there's a picture to reckon with, and a dark star, and a lady friend of Red Alastair's! Can you beat it? Even a Hollywood director couldn't think up this one. But the man —the man on the tower——"

A fighting look came into his dark eyes.

"Revolting sight! Don't quite know why—but somehow—filthy! Reminded me of that fat Greek in Paris, sitting like a blotchy swollen spider in his den, waiting for his doped girls to be brought along—bah! I'll get Red Beard! Hunt the hairy brute right off the map."

Poor Alan! In a few more hours he was to discover that a map, even a map of the world, was more than an affair of latitude and longitude as far as Red Beard was concerned.

Dinner rather took his mind off his troubles. There were guests he liked. One, an M. P. for one of the Border counties, met him more than half-way on the question of road development. Over some fine old brandy from the cellars of Gorm, the two men built bridges and tunnels and roads over Scotland; opened up Northern China; decided on the best type of car for use in desert country; and were passionately reclaiming, for Holland, vast new tracts of submerged country when their host brought them back to social duties of the moment.

Alan, however, was himself again, perfectly confident of being able to deal with life and its problems in his rational systematic way. The old tower and the man on its battlements no longer seemed ominous.

"Liver, I suppose," he told himself. "Never knew I had one before, though. I'll satisfy myself that beggar's not about before I go to bed, though. Might set fire to the trees with his flaming red beard."

In the big drawing-room, where lamps and fires made shadows dance on molded ceilings and white-paneled walls, on the faded coral of brocaded curtains that shut out sky and stars and wind-torn clouds, the Lady Maisry sang to them; of love, of death, of ecstasy, of bitter longing—ballads of olden times. She sang with the last perfect simplicity of a genuine artist; and with smiles, with tears, the listeners paid tribute to her gift.

As the last note echoed in the quiet, spellbound room, Alan knew! He knew he was in love, exquisitely, irrevocably, passionately. What he did not know was that, because of it, he would cross a barrier into the unknown, and there meet terror beyond conception of what terror could be.

A few hours later, when the guests were gone and the old Earl sleeping in his room, he and Maisry sat and talked together. Her low, shaken voice confided

in him the horror that had thrust itself into her life, and he listened with a mounting love and pity and fear for her that carried him like a tidal wave far, far beyond every intellectual boundary his mind had ever recognized.

He wanted to think that she was ill, that her nerves were playing tricks, that the old castle of Gorm with its memories and legends had worked on her, that change of scene would cure her, that she must marry him and come away and live and laugh in the sun and forget. His sane logical mind clamored for such solution of her secret. But below the rational protests of his disciplined clear mind, deeper understanding stirred and apprehended.

The woman he loved looked at him, her haunted eyes besought him. He must make a decision. Now!

He got to his feet, bent down and drew her up beside him, her hands in his strong clasp. He did not kiss her—no, not even the cold slim hands that trembled in his own. But in the silence his very soul spoke to her, gave lasting deep assurance of his passion.

"I believe you," he said at last. "Every word you've told me. And I'm going to follow this up. It had never occurred to me that things like—like Red Alastair and his Picture could exist. You've convinced me."

"But Alan! Alan!" her low voice broke in fear. "I told you only because—your love gives you a right to know my secret, because I want you to see how useless it is to love me. It is hopeless, most dangerous to interfere. This is my fate. All these years, these centuries, he has waited, growing stronger. Perhaps, at first, he might have been sent back—back to his own place. Now it's too late. He's learned the trick of leaving his awful painted moorland and getting into our world."

She shivered at the fierce fighting light of battle her words brought to the dark eyes looking down into her own.

"Alan! It is fatal—quite fatal to oppose him. You must never put foot inside the Keep. Oh, can't you see, have I not explained it all? It is hopeless. I told my secret to prevent your interfering, running into hideous peril. To stop you going. Alan! Not you—not *you*——"

His grip of her hands slackened. He stooped, his eyes sought hers in sudden overwhelming wonder.

"D'you mean that you—that you care, too? Maisry! Maisry! If you do, nothing can separate us. No dream or ghost! Now I know the facts. I am prepared. You have armed me against surprize. I'm ready for Red Alastair. Do you think"—he held her softly, adoring her, sheltering her from all the world—"do you think I'd let man or devil take you from me—now?"

## 2

ONE. Two. Three.

The strokes tolled out from a church-tower of some near-by village as Alan left the castle and made his way to the old gray Keep. The chimes brought a flash of self-mockery into his face.

"If the old crowd at home could see me now—trotting off in the moonlight at three a. m. to meet a fellow who died two hundred years ago! Mack's waistcoat buttons would shoot clear across Lake Huron with the laugh he'd get out of it!"

The wild clear sky, glittering stars and stinging wind were beginning to put a different complexion on the past few hours at Gorm—vast shadow-filled firelit romantic old castle that it was. Here, striding across the turf, trees tossing and creaking, clouds driving, the shrill mad pipe of the wind in his ears, Alan's body exulted in the challenge to his senses; his

physical rather than psychical powers were called upon.

It was extraordinarily difficult for a man of his type to sustain the vision that Maisry's story had called up. With every step, old habits of reasoning took hold more firmly. When he reached the huge barred iron-studded door of the Keep he had once more put the Red Alastair legend into the realm of fantasy. He wondered at himself for accepting it at Maisry's valuation even for an hour. He recalled a bit of doggerel he'd chanced on that day, or, rather, the previous day:

> Love, love, love, love,
> Love it is a dizziness!
> It winna let a puir body
> Gang aboot his bizziness!

"And that explains me to myself." He fitted a big oiled key into the lock and gave a half-shamed laugh at his own expense. "What odds, though! If Maisry wants me to make a fool of myself in this particular way—I'm for it. Anyhow, I intended to see the ugly hairy beggar off the premises. Might as well take a look at the Picture too, while I'm here. There aren't many back home can beat me at sight-seeing, I'll say!"

He confided these conclusions to the inner side of the door as he closed and locked it behind him, in order to trap any vagrant lurking inside the tower. He switched on his torch, a large, powerful one with a new battery, and began his strangely timed visit.

"Better check up on the plan again."

He patted the wide pockets of his overcoat, drew out a folded piece of semi-transparent tough paper familiar to architects, opened out the worn crackling sheet and examined once more the scale-drawing and faded cramped letter press.

"H-m-m! Ground floor. This was where soldiers were lodged."

He forced back a narrow door on its rusted creaking hinges and went in. Silence and darkness. The nine-foot thick walls were cut to north and south exposures, forming huge window-seats, broad and cold as tombstones. The windows were small, narrow, and heavily barred by iron grilles as thick as a man's wrist. A yawning fireplace like a roofless cupboard showed stained and blackened floor and a pair of massive iron dogs.

He stood on the hearth and peered up. A vast chimney gaped to the sky; he could see a pale moon with torn rags of cloud across her face. And she was the last friendly familiar object he remembered that night.

SOUND of a shuffling heavy footstep somewhere above took him to the foot of the stairway; he craned his head to listen. The spiral stairs were steep and a bare two feet in breadth; his shoulders rubbed the outer wall as he climbed. He reached the next level and flashed his torch into the thick absorbent darkness of another hollow room. The door of it stood wide. He moved cautiously across the threshold; the brilliant spotlight of his torch showed no one there.

This was the dining-hall and a higher ceiling, more windows, a smoother flooring, and less rough-hewn fireplace distinguished it from the room below. Above the hearth, with its hollowed blackened stones and battered mantelpiece, a startling vivid thing brought Alan's traveling torch to an abrupt halt.

"For heaven's sake! Is that the Picture?"

His dark lean face regarded it with a positive glare of incredulous belief—unwilling furious belief.

"Land of Moses! Just a fake! It's as new as—as the Chrysler Building! The paint's as fresh as a ship's just out of dry-dock."

In the shock of discovery, he forgot the

footsteps. He strode across the dusty floor, trained his torch full on the painted scene.

"Damn — and damn — and damn again!" he glowered, swearing in soft whispered fury, eyes narrowed under black impatient brows. "Maisry was dead right about its infernal technique. It's more like Vorangowl than it's like itself. It's damnable!"

It was. The thing confronted him, exquisitely improbable, perfect beyond human hand or brain to conceive and execute. Some six feet square of the rough wall that formed the chimney-breast had been smoothed down and prepared to a surface even and fine as asphalt. Far-reaching miles of country were compressed within that six-foot bit of wall, the whole of Glenhallion estates from castle grounds to the Kaims of Vorangowl — high brooding eagle-haunted plateau of moor and rock and fir-woods that was the western limit. It was the view that stretched before the windows of the library at Gorm castle where he had watched yesterday's sun go down behind the same craggy ridge of rock portrayed on the painted horizon before him; the view he'd been watching before his eyes dropped to the Keep and that abominable tramp that lounged there on its battlements.

Stranger, newcomer he might be, but he knew that view very thoroughly indeed, and his trained falcon-keen eye recognized and acknowledged the astounding reproduction of one landmark after another.

"It's like looking through a window at the thing. If it weren't three a. m. and this wall facing due east instead of west, I'd take my oath that I was staring through a sheet of plate-glass at Vorangowl itself as it looked yesterday about five o'clock! The same effect to the last detail—the same feathery cloud-shape over the pointed hill—and blue haze over the patch of wood to the north. It's not just an April evening, it's the identical evening I watched yesterday."

He started, frowned, looked more intently at the Picture on the wall.

"This cursed torch . . . if it were only daylight! The infernal thing—why—it looks like mist rolling up over the road—actually rolling up before my eyes!"

And then his whole mind and body, every faculty and sense were suddenly sharpened to amazing perception. His breath came in deep sighs as though he were toiling up-hill with a weight to carry; his face hollowed and lost color; sweat stood in great beads on his forehead.

The faint far-off figure of a man on the painted road — a stony track flung down across the heights—was coming nearer, nearer, nearer. . . . A figure that had been a vague shadow in the mist, when Alan first looked at the Picture, whose minuteness had served to emphasize the deserted aching loneliness of the moors. Now, the figure was moving forward, swiftly, swiftly over the stony endless road—past miles of dark woods, down the steep drop to the glen until it was swallowed up in the trees and shrubberies of Gorm which formed the foreground of the Picture.

A corner of the Keep itself showed in this same foreground, a bit of the gray weathered battlements.

Alan stared, waiting with pulses beating heavy and slow, watching for the man to reappear. Abruptly he came. He was there on the battlemented roof of the Keep, his great red head and fiery beard sharply defined. He turned to look at Alan, flung up a great arm in menace or derisive greeting.

In that instant a sound of high hooting wind filled the Keep, shrieked through

the barred windows, roared down the hollow shaft of the stairway. Alan whipped about, torch in hand, to see the door slam in his face. The wind dropped as he flung himself forward to pull and tug with mad violence at the clumsy ring of iron that formed a handle. As he vainly struggled, there was a sound of heavy footsteps coming from above, halting outside his door, moving on downward and out of hearing.

Silence, heavy and sightless as a grave's, closed down on the Keep and its prisoner.

The shock of it roused Alan like a blow in the face. He'd stood bemused, dreaming, hypnotized by a bit of painted wall and let himself be trapped. Tricked! Some bit of ancient conjuring, some ingenious contraption in the chimney-flue had caused the illusion.

And the uproar of the wild and sudden wind? He shrugged that problem off. Whoever worked the Picture fake could take care of that too!

He flashed his light up the chimney but could see nothing beyond bare, grimed old stones rising in rough crumbling perpendicular. He examined the rooms opening off the dining-hall; they were merely cells, unlighted, full of dust and rubble. He returned to the main room and looked up at the windows with careful calculating eye; they were narrow, strongly barred, set high on the walls so that no arrow, glancing through, should strike a human target. No faintest hope from them, even could he climb like a fly or were possessed of the sharpest of files. Only an explosive could burst open his prison bars.

And now that cursed red-bearded man was at large while he was trapped and helpless here. What was the game? Robbery—the old plate at Gorm? Or jewels—would the beast go near Maisry, frighten her, hurt her? What had he plotted and planned as he hid here all those hours?

Not even hidden, though, Alan reflected. The creature had brazened it out on the battlements in full light. How was it no one but himself had seen? The Earl had been standing beside him when—— Hastily averting his mind's eye from the thought that leaped out of ambush to answer his question, Alan said aloud in clearest, concisest tones:

"That's an easy one! The old man's sight is failing!" and this in spite of knowing that only twelve months ago the Earl had once more carried off the Fofarshire trophy for target shooting at the annual sports. "And, after all, it's not likely that people who live here go poking about and staring as I've been doing. It's *perfectly* simple that I happened to be the only one to see that infernal tramp."

Other explanations buzzed in his brain and he beat them back like a cloud of noisome flies. There was no other explanation.

Maisry's words sounded in his memory. "Only some have *the sight*. Father hasn't got it, and that's why he's never seen Red Alastair and doesn't believe in the legend—but it's fact and no legend at all. I have *the sight*. And you have it too, Alan. I knew at once; I always recognize this wonderful, this terrible power in anyone else. You will see Red Alastair, most certainly you will see him, and that is why I can explain to you about his Picture that he lives in."

For some minutes he closed his eyes, recalled deliberately scenes and images and places he had left behind in America. He wanted to shake off illusion, to steady his swirling thoughts, to forget the dark disturbance that swelled and rose and battered at his sanity.

He thought of a holiday he had spent loafing in the sun and warm salt water

in Florida. He remembered a day in the woods near a logging-camp when an angry she-bear had chased him as he made off with her cub. He saw himself rocking and smoking and yarning on the broad screened porches of his aunt's country-house in the White Mountains; flashed through the hours of last Christmas day, spent with old Friedland in New York . . . the fires and friends and brilliant dinner-table. . . .

He opened his eyes on the Picture, and had the sensation of dropping from heaven to hell. On the road—returning, retreating to the misty Kaims of Vorangowl—the man was back again. But this time, and Alan watched with all his soul although he denied the thing he watched, a faint shadowy second figure followed after the man. Beyond a rocky cliff-face far up on the Kaims the red-haired figure halted, turned about to beckon the weary shadow that toiled after him, a shadow that grew clearer with every step it took. Suddenly Alan knew it.

"Maisry! Maisry! Maisry! Come back —come back to me!"

His full-throated anguished cry beat and echoed against the high cold walls of his prison. Again, again he called. He must bring her back, he *must,* before she set foot on that high narrow trail skirting the precipice.

That meant death to her, lasting, damnable, eternal death. He was conscious of a single overmastering passion of determination to bring her back—back from the cliff-face where she would slip to darkness, where he would lose her in this world and the next.

With a new shock, he recognized that his will was locked with the will of the red-haired man who waited for Maisry beyond the cliff path. The Picture darkened. Mist rolled gray and baffling down from the heights, and in the leaden skies a dark star shone, a star of evil copper-red that changed the green woods and April grass to somber purples.

Old Jamie's warning darted across his memory: "The Dark Star is up over the Kaims of Vorangowl."

He saw Maisry move forward, saw Red Alastair beckon with insistent hand. Deathless love. Deathless hate. The twin fires leaped up, all his conscious being focused to a single point—to conquer Red Alastair.

He knew his antagonist, acknowledged him at last. He knew his weapon too. His only weapon. The Will. A clean strong sword that all hell tried to tear from his grasp.

And now Maisry was coming back, back to him from the dark cliff, from engulfing mists, from Red Alastair, slowly, moving wraith-like past wood and glen and through the enfolding trees in the grounds at last. As she vanished, she turned to smile at him.

His torch fell from his nerveless hand. He sagged to the ground, huddled with head on knees; he felt old and worn and done. His next recollection was of light at the windows. Dawn, and the high sweet note of skylarks on the wing.

And the Picture showed a fresh and verdant April evening, an empty road wound up over far-distant heights, a clear tender sky shone above all. It was a magic tender exquisite study of a northern spring. Alan looked and experienced emotions he had never dreamed of possessing.

"And that was her dream! That child caught—held—dragged to hell!

"Maisry!" he addressed the Picture as if she were still on the road before his eyes. "Forgive me. My faithlessness, my stupidity. You shall never tread that road again. It is my fight now. It is between me and Red Alastair. *And—I—will—win.*"

The last words fell with slow, deadly emphasis, a vow abruptly extinguished, the echo of the last word torn from his lips by an inferno of wind. The Keep rocked in its fury, vibrating ominously to its high tremendous shriek.

He turned to the door, prepared for assault, and was faced by a new shock of surprize. The door stood wide open. Cool morning air, bearing a tang of pine and a freshness of young wet leaves and grass, met him as he ran to the lower floor, to find the outer door unlocked and opened to the misty morning.

Soberly, slowly, thankfully he returned to Gorm, deeply aware that the Keep was solitary now; no need to search. Its demon was not there. For the moment there was no enemy, no battlefield.

There was only Maisry, and he must go to her.

3

"And Maisry?" Alan looked at the breakfast table laid for two and his eyes lost their eagerness. "Not joining us, Cousin David?"

"No. Her maid says she had a bad night. I don't know what to make of it; these last weeks she's altered beyond recognition. I've tried to persuade her to go away for a change. Our local man, Doctor Shields, says she's well enough but makes no effort; he thinks there's something on her mind."

Alan regarded the fish on his plate with a stern frown. He'd been doing some hard, intensive thinking and saw a gleam of light on the very dark horizon of his thoughts.

"I met a chap on the ship coming over. Lives in Stirling. Several people on board knew him well. Seems he's made a great reputation as a nerve specialist. Broome, Eliot Broome's his name."

The Earl's unhappy face lightened. "Ah, that's a household word in Scotland, and in other countries too. A nerve-man, yes! I didn't think of him for Maisry. D'you suppose she——"

"It's hard to do anything but guess. This fellow Broome impressed me more than anyone I've met in years. Got to know him fairly well—y'know how it is on board ship. We yarned several nights away together. Made a good team for discussions, as he always took a diametrically opposite viewpoint from mine. I'm for fact, the proven fact."

His voice weakened as he proclaimed his lifelong standard. How foolishly short it fell of measuring up with last night's phenomenon!

"Maisry might be upset, imagine there was something seriously wrong if I called in Broome."

"Let me go to Stirling and talk to him. I could bring him back as a friend, not introduce him professionally. Let him see Maisry off guard."

It was quickly arranged. By ten o'clock, Alan was speeding along the road south, a great relief in his mind that there was someone likely to listen to his fantastic improbable story and discuss it without prejudice. As far as he knew Eliot Broome, the impossible and fantastic interested him profoundly. If only he'd come, and at once! Maisry must not endure last night's horror again.

He found Broome at home, and the specialist listened with immense concentration.

"Yes, I can come, and now!" he gave assurance. "I returned by an earlier ship than I had intended—meant to finish off some laboratory experiments before seeing patients. A few days in retreat, y'know. But this won't wait an hour; we'll talk on the drive back."

After lunch, at which Maisry did not appear, the Earl took the two younger men into his study. The father's idea

was that Maisry needed a change of scene, that she was moping here at Gorm; and it was evident he knew nothing of her dream, or the fear that shadowed her life. He would strongly have resented the idea of his daughter sharing the vulgar superstitions of the countryside; he appreciated Red Alastair as a picturesque legend but not as an existent contemporary.

After their conference, Alan took his ally over to the Keep.

"God! It's altered again!"

Alan, who had made straight for the Picture, regarded it with angry incredulity.

"It was a clear late afternoon scene when I left it. There was no figure. Just bare spring landscape. Now the man's back in it again! He was right up in the mist when I first saw this infernal thing; I thought it a clever dodge of the painter —that solitary tiny figure emphasized the vast desolate moor. Now—look at that, will you!"

The two stared. On the road, not a mile from the entrance-gate to Gorm, and facing toward it, a man's figure was painted. Insolently, he seemed to dominate the lovely lonely Glen, and his uncovered head burned red as fire under leaden skies.

•

ALAN's face set like a mask. With loathing, he noted the changed aspect of the Picture, its gloom and shadow and brooding horror; a scene from Dante's purgatory rather than the living burgeoning earth.

"Even the star is in it again," he muttered. "The Dark Star."

His companion looked long at the blood-red portent over Vorangowl.

"The star is Red Alastair's signal, then! A sort of challenge."

In striking contrast with Alan's quicksilver energy, Broome stood regarding the Picture; his massive proportions, leonine head, and slow deliberate movements typical of the man. Alan was all speed and movement and quick fiery courage, lean and swift and dangerous in anger as a black panther. Broome's was a slow, deadly, precise strength that makes no mistakes, that waits to strike and never misses; superbly master of himself, he was a man to seek as desert-travelers turn to the shelter of a rock.

"You consider this," Broome's quiet voice began, "the work of a man, some tremendous work of genius?"

The other looked at him, his lean face, his black eyes cold, furious, implacable.

"It's a trick, a damnable hellish trick—to put the wind up—to unnerve me. Why not? He's had two hundred years to learn, to practise his infernal game."

The specialist regarded him with pity, with comprehension.

"I was prepared to accept your theory, that Red Alastair was a miracle-man, a marvel who had discovered the secret of perpetuating life. The secret could—it will—be discovered! *But this Picture is not the work of a man.* It proves that Red Alastair died—in the flesh."

Alan turned an impatient eye on his companion. "What proves it?" he demanded.

"He couldn't accomplish that," Broome's eyes narrowed on the Picture, "while he was still bound by human limitations in his body. He had to say good-bye to that body before journeying to the hell where such magic was learned. Red Alastair is dead. The Picture is an open door by which he comes and goes to that far hell of his."

Alan flung a defiant look at the painted moors. "If there's a way to open a door, there must be a way to close it."

"Undoubtedly! As we saw in the records, though, a door of this nature

can't be manipulated in any obvious way."

The other nodded gloomy assent. "They seem to have tried everything. Painting it out—cutting it out—every sort of destruction——"

"And each failure gave new advantage to the enemy."

"How's that?"

"Because," Broome answered, "they actively acknowledged Red Alastair's power. Without defense or understanding, they offered combat and he won. His existence in our world depended, and still depends, on such victories."

The Picture gleamed sullen, threatening, unchanged upon the wall. Unchanged! Not quite. The man's face was lifted, flung back, its eyes green as a storm-wave in the lightning's glare.

Alan's eyes met them unflinching, he gave back look for look, he seemed to project his very soul to thrust back the power in that painted evil face. Broome, acutely aware of the sudden impact of will against will, stood like stone: he bent the whole weight of his strong disciplined mind to Alan's need. Then, like the snapping of a twig, it was over. The strain, the tension, the unbearable pressure ceased. Alan's breath was expelled in a long quivering sigh, he leaned his weight on Broome's shoulder, turned a gray face and sunken eyes.

"Let's get out—away from this."

With eloquent gesture he turned and left the tower, his companion close behind. They walked across the intervening space in silence, stood at the castle entrance to look back at the gray, ominous Keep.

"I was wrong!" Alan's voice was hoarse. "Reason — fact — logic — all wrong! It's neither genius nor science behind Red Alastair's devilish Picture. It's black magic, it's from hell."

"Don't blame yourself; no sane man would accept the true explanation without proof—the sort of proof you've had." Broome put a hand on Alan's shoulder. "Can you arrange for us to see Lady Maisry now, and be undisturbed for the next hour? There's only a bare margin of safety for her; she must never, as you said, follow *him* on that road again; she'd not survive it."

"If she went away, now, at once, within the hour! Out of the country! She could fly across to——"

Alan stopped at the other's decisive gesture.

"Physical distance is a factor that does not count. The man, the devil she follows on that moorland road can summon her at will—from across the world. It is the soul, the ego, the flame within the lamp of clay that is subject to Red Alastair: the body is a thing apart, governed by different laws and limitations."

## 4

They went upstairs and were admitted by a maid to Lady Maisry's apartments. Alan sent a message.

The girl quickly returned. "Yes, my lord, at once! And this gentleman, also. Will you come to her sitting-room, please?"

The two waited in a room that hung like a nest high up in the southwest wing of Gorm castle. It's window thrust out in a semicircular sweep over a bit of wild uncultivated ground below—long grass and daffodils tossed together, and bushy willow-stumps flashed in sun and wind beside a shallow stream whose soft chuckle sounded in the room through widely opened windows.

How like Maisry, how like her strange lovely self, this room! Straight from the devil-haunted tower, it seemed to Alan as velvet-sweet and fresh as a copse of wood-violets.

She came in to them at once. Her eyes, their cloud-gray beauty repeated in the chiffons of her dress, showed immense fatigue—dark pools no fresh quick source could stir, no sun touch to happy life again. Her face was pale as ivory; she moved across the room slowly, with trained habitual grace, but could not hide her deathly weariness.

Eliot Broome made up his mind at once. Here was one who deserved no less than truth. She was a fighter, strong, and able to endure. He explained himself without preamble, begged her to let him put what knowledge and resources he had at her disposal. She met him with equal directness.

"It is good of you—quite extraordinarily kind—to have come so quickly. Everyone knows your fame, your skill. Tell me one thing, first, and I want the absolute truth, please, Mr. Broome. Alan has told you about my dream?"

The specialist nodded.

"And that I connect it with Red Alastair and his Picture?"

Again he gave grave assent.

"You know, then, that I consider myself to be haunted by this ancestor of mine; and, knowing this, do you believe that I am unbalanced, my nerves deranged, my brain affected?"

"Dear Lady Maisry, I believe you to be as sane as I am, very sane and unusually well-balanced. That is the reason you can bear to hear the truth from me."

She grew very white. "I understand. I am in danger—in deadly peril?"

"Yes," he agreed. "In more than mortal peril; yet, courageous as you are, I would not confess this if I did not know you could be rescued."

Light flashed, died out again in her eyes, gray as lake-water at dawn. She shook her golden head.

"Please, not that! I dare not, dare not think along those lines. I am one of the ill-fated of my line. In life, in death, *he* cannot be defeated."

Broome rose to his feet, took her two hands, and drew her up to face him. His eyes, his voice, were stern.

"Listen to me, Lady Maisry. That is a piece of unwisdom I had not dreamed you could say, or believe. It is just such unquestioning belief in Red Alastair that has enabled him to remain earth-bound, expanding his mad rapacious ego to colossal dimensions. *His existence depends utterly on people's faith and fear.*"

She stood rigid in his grasp, her face fixed in tense abstracted thought.

"But he—he is more than man! He is a devil—served by devils. It is not one human soul against another, it never has been that. You do not know Red Alastair's history, nor does Alan; there has been so little time."

"No. We have only glanced at the records. Is there any special reason why you are haunted? Are all the women of your family tormented?"

"No. I am the first; the first woman that has had '*the sight*'. And the reason why he—why he calls me, draws me after him, is this——"

She took up a small shabby leather case from a table at her side and opened it to show an oval miniature set in pale gold with rim of pearls. The two men looked at it and at her.

"A lovely portrait of you," Alan said.

"No—not of me. That was painted in 1700. It is a portrait of an ancestor of mine on my mother's side—Lady Jean Haugh. Red Alastair stole her on her wedding-day, snatched her from the bridegroom's side as the pair stood before the priest, and rode off with her. To escape him, she flung herself off the cliff-path on the Kaims of Vorangowl. He was riding recklessly, as always, and no doubt his grasp of her loosened as he held up his frightened horse. This is all

in the records, and there were many witnesses to this particular crime; for it was April and shepherds were all out on the moors tending the ewes and lambs."

"Then Lady Jean Haugh did actually defeat him for once!"

"Not finally. She merely postponed his victory. He has waited some two hundred years for her. And now—here am I."

"Exactly. Here are you. And you are not the Lady Jean Haugh."

"Physically I am, to the last gold hair. And more than that Red Alastair would not recognize. There is no time now to tell you more fully of his life; one year was like another to him, blood and battle, riding and fighting. But chiefly women—the records are black with their names—their unspeakable fate."

Eliot Broome watched the girl narrowly. His next question made Alan start and lean forward with hands suddenly cold and shaking, the pulses throbbing at his temples.

"And you? You have not thought of escaping as Lady Jean escaped?"

MAISRY did not shrink. The idea was evidently a familiar one.

"My unwisdom, as you call it, is not so great as that. Nor do I count suicide escape—from anything."

Broome's square rugged face lightened.

"Ah, now you are wise, indeed. If you will continue to think with such intelligence and courage, I repeat—Red Alastair can be defeated."

Again she shook her head.

"You scarcely know how truly monstrous he is, and was from the beginning. Oh, they are not old wives' tales, the records of his birth and life and death. They come from varying sources, perfectly sound and authentic, and all agree that he was monstrous, devil-possessed from birth."

"And his death? What is recorded of that?"

"It was never recorded as proved fact. He lived alone at Gorm after Lady Jean's death; entirely, mysteriously alone, cut off from every human being. No one took food to the castle, no one saw him outside its walls. But at night the Keep would blaze with light—and books say 'ringed about with most infernal fire', and thin high pipings and whistlings echoed to the hills. It was a terror in the countryside for three years."

"And then?"

"The old castle of Gorm was burned to the ground. It blazed and smoldered for nights and days. No one would go near it. Only the Keep was left standing."

"And the Picture? Is it mentioned in the early records?"

Alan, listening, strained forward to hear her reply.

"Yes." Loathing dawned in her eyes. "Duncan, tenth Earl of Glenhallion, inherited after Gorm was burned. Red Alastair had vanished, although his bones were never found, and the popular belief was that he had not died in the fire. Duncan rebuilt the castle as it stands now, and attempted to destroy what was recorded in those days as 'a most strange and foule magick'. Instead, he was himself destroyed, his body found on the battlements with a broken back."

Alan frowned, turned to Broome.

"At least, Alastair was living then! He must have been responsible for that murder."

"But many have died like that," Maisry went on. "Many have tried to destroy the Picture. For almost two hundred years men have tried, and failed, and died most horribly."

"Opposing the psychical with the

physical." Broome's massive head was hunched between his shoulders, his abstracted gaze bent on the carpet. "Red Alastair died. He exists in another state of being. He must be met, opposed, conquered in that other state."

Alan's words came slow and weighted. "I would not acknowledge that before. I've been bluffing myself. I knew he was something — not human — when first I saw him on the battlements. I dared not admit it. It seemed too difficult, too dangerous. I was afraid."

Tears came to Maisry's eyes. Broome's smile, however, was a benediction.

"Now you've come to grips with yourself. Of course you're afraid. What do you expect? You're human, not a devil like Red Alastair."

"What I mean, more precisely," Alan continued in the same slow painful way, "is that I recognize at last what must be done—and I'm prepared to do it. I know in the main, that is; I shall leave details to you."

"I can give you protection. I can prepare you for the journey. Beyond that none can help."

"What journey? What are you both talking about?" Maisry broke in with quick breathless words. "Alan! You mustn't—you're not dreaming of——"

He took her hand, kissed the fingers that clung to his. She turned to Broome, her hand still holding fast to Alan's.

"Tell me! Tell me! What are you going to let him do? Protection, you said. Oh, what are you going to do?—where is Alan going?"

"Don't break now, my dearest." Alan rose and stood before her. "I need your help, all you can give."

"All you can give," echoed Broome, and his tone touched her to profound stillness. "You have a capacity for faith. It is a two-edged quality. You brought Red Alastair into the compass of your existence by your faith in him and his power to do you harm. You can transfer that faith to Alan and his power to conquer Red Alastair. You must choose. There can be no compromise. Do you believe in Alan's power to defeat your enemy, or do you not?"

Her look turned to Alan's straight, tall figure. He was changed, much changed since his surrender to the deep-hidden unconscious self he had so long ignored. His dark Pharaoh look of impenetrable command and dignity added a decade to his years.

As she watched him, amazement swamped her fear. It was not possible to conceive defeat for this regal-looking man.

"I fight for *you*, Alan. I believe in *you*."

He looked long into her eyes, saw all that lay behind her spoken words, and took her hand as if to seal a compact. "Then we're ready now for the fight—for the victory."

He turned to Broome.

"We are of one mind now, one resolve, utterly and completely one."

5

Two great seven-branched candelabra, on massive stands, reached tall as young trees on either side of the fireplace. Their candles showed the Picture in warm golden light. Through the barred unglassed windows, night air drifted mild and sweet with scent of hawthorn, mingling with tang of wood and leaves that glowed and sizzled in a brazier upon the hearth.

A truckle-bed showed dimly in a corner of the dining-hall; two light garden-seats and a great pile of wood and many thick white candles were also visible.

"You are sure, you swear, that Maisry

is safe? To wait here while she, perhaps, is——"

Broome interrupted him.

"I know she is safe. For *her* I can absolutely vouch. For you, it is different; I can only protect you up to a point; the issue depends entirely on yourself after that. Your will against his. You are taking the most fantastic risk, as I warned you. If you lose, if your endurance and courage are mastered by him for an instant, you are mastered for all time. You will become what he is—a devil; you will work for him, yes, even if it means helping to bait the Lady Maisry to hell!"

"Never!" There was none of Alan's wonted fire and scorn in his voice; emotion was stripped from him, human attributes consumed by divine unbending will. "You are sure, then? She is tired, ill, she may fall asleep. And in sleep Red Alastair calls her."

"You don't know the laws that govern other states of being, but, believe me, Red Alastair is restricted in his activities as we are ourselves. Laws of gravity, of magnetism, of attraction and repulsion, of growth and decay, of tides and winds and electricity—all the myriad laws that govern us and our objective world have their parallels in other worlds."

"Who makes them?"

"Who makes ours?" was the quiet response. "Fire burns you; a fall from a height will break you in pieces! Why?"

"Because we're made of human stuff, perishable matter."

"And do you imagine that, free of your body, you cannot suffer or perish? Red Alastair, I repeat, has no power to pass the barriers that protect Lady Maisry for this one night."

"And after that?"

"Her protection will be in your power."

Broome turned abruptly to the wall. "Watch! Watch the Picture, on your life! He mustn't see you first. He mustn't call you to him. The attack must be from you."

The two men stood shoulder to shoulder, their gaze sternly set upon the Picture. A faint copper tinge darkened its evening sky, gray haze began to cloud the heights, shadows fell across the wide moors, the woods, and glen; the long road seemed a net flung down—a trap—a sinister living thing that coiled and waited for its prey.

Mist thickened and spread upon the heights, and Broome's hand went to his breast pocket. He drew out a small phial and unstoppered it, pressed it into Alan's hand.

"Keep your eyes on the mist, on the mist above Vorangowl. He is coming. Drink this, *on the instant,* when his figure appears. He must not catch you in the body."

The coppery gleam deepened in the sky, focussed, concentrated to a center. The Dark Star shone out over the broad estate of Glenhallion; and, on the far horizon of the Picture, mist rose, wreathed, and crept across the sullen moors . . . blind herald of doom.

Alan stood with the phial to his lips, breathing slowly, evenly. The hand that held the little clouded glass was steady, his dark brows met in a frown of concentration over eyes black as a deep tarn in winter, and as cold. The fine bones of his face showed under taut muscles and sunken cheeks.

On the heights of Vorangowl, on a craggy spur of rock above the fatal gorge and dizzy cliff-path, the mists grew thin . . . parted . . . swirled aside. A figure, a mere black speck, but infinitely menacing, was visible.

SWIFT as a bird's flash, Alan drank. The phial slipped, crashed to the stone floor.

Broome's strong arms were about him instantly, supporting him, lifting him to the truckle-bed in the corner. Blind, deaf, empty shell, his body lay there as Broome turned quickly back to the Picture.

Watching it, his heart seemed to turn over in his breast. The dread he had concealed from Alan racked him now.

"Gone. Beyond all help, all knowledge now. Fighting alone, unaided. Following — following that devil — even to hell."

Then, in the Picture, he saw Alan signal from the Keep, across the gulf of time and space the painted surface bridged; signal from the battlements with imperious command. Good! He had flung down his gage to battle. Next moment, Broome saw his tall light figure running through the grounds, through the gates, along the road that led to Vorangowl. Swiftly, swiftly Alan's feet carried him, borne by the impetus of his strong will.

Now the glen lay behind him; the wooded Kaims closed about him jealously. On, on he went, past threat of glooming trees, past barren reaches of the upper glen.

Broome watched, his heart going as if he himself ran across the fatal spellbound moors. He could see Red Alastair fighting his way downward—restrained by Alan's stronger impetus—taken unawares. Ah, Red Alastair was gaining ground now! If he reached the cliff-path, if he crossed it first, then Alan must suffer terribly. It was clear the fact was apprehended by both adversaries.

All Red Alastair's unbridled longing, his mad unappeasable desire, had focussed on the scene of his defeated lust. For two hundred years his restless terrible ghost had wandered there, watching, waiting. The cliff and rocky narrow trail were deep imprinted with his torment, his deathless hate.

Swifter, swifter Alan ran, up the steeps, over heather and stony tracts, on—on—on. And, from the mists, Red Alastair loomed larger; the balefire of hair and beard gleamed. From either end, the two antagonists approached the fatal wall of rock.

Broome leaned forward, his whole consciousness centered on Alan's last tremendous effort.

"He's done it! He's there first!"

The quiet thankful voice rang in the still room and the candles flared in answer, showing every detail on the painted wall.

On the dizzy edge of space, Alan took the path lightly, easily; and, on its further side, Red Alastair bulked gigantic, the mist recoiling—leaving him in space —alone—waiting. . . .

Alan had crossed, flashed upon his enemy—closer, closer, until to Broome's sight there scarcely seemed a yard between them. Then, for a long moment of torture, both figures were motionless. Broome well understood the meaning of that titanic pause. Will battled with will. One must retreat, one pursue.

The Picture suddenly assumed the look of some vast amphitheater: hollow curving mountain ranges, their crested heads upreared, closed in upon the combatants. Beyond them, screened by vaporous mist, Broome was aware of watchers, felt the pressure of their blind malevolence.

"So," he whispered, "Red Alastair is not come alone!"

A knife seemed to twist in his heart as he watched; every moment was a year of horror; every instant of the grim rigid contest meant unspeakable effort to Alan.

The mist rolled blindingly, it wrapped about Red Alastair, drew him back, back to the heights. And Alan followed on.

Broome was aware that he followed with sure and steady purpose, more and more slowly, growing smaller, dimmer at every step. The Kaims of Vorangowl were being blotted out. Mist rose on every side. The hills, the glen, the woods were only smears of vague color. Now the foreground and the corner of the old Keep vanished. Only the Dark Star shone with metallic copper glow and showed Alan's tiny toiling figure going upward—upward. It reached the farthest peak, showed for a flashing second, black, tiny, remote; then it was lost.

Broome's eyes ached; he closed them, opened them again. No, it was really over now. The Picture on the wall was only a gray dull blur of moving swirling mist. Not a stone, not a leaf, not a blade of grass was visible. Even the Dark Star had sunk, its blood-red gloom wiped out. Mist — impenetrable, blinding, moving mist hid everything.

6

Two long days dragged to evening. The weary terrifying hours of a third night closed on Gorm. Maisry, sleepless and worn, went at midnight to share Broome's vigil.

Nothing was changed. The candles, burning in a windless night, showed nothing more—only gray surging clouds of mist in ceaseless movement. The Picture was like the crater of a volcano where smoke eddied and swung in the void before the destroying fire burst up from its depths.

The watchers saw no change in Alan's face except, perhaps, a deeper shadow of repose. It was a sign, Broome knew, that he was further and further away with every passing hour—following—following through space—on and on to dim uncertain perilous horizons where the finite mind can no longer function.

Broome faced his thought steadily, though it was overwhelming in its horror. Had Red Alastair the power to lead on to voids no mortal spirit can endure? His straining eyes grew more intent.

"Something is moving behind the mist," he said.

A rift showed at the top of the Picture; a glimpse of pale sky, a tooth of jagged rock appeared. Thin wispy trails floated across the rift. Gradually, as if rent and shredded by a furious wind, the whole horizon cleared to show a colorless cloudless sky and moorland heights, below which a sea of mist still whirled and eddied to and fro.

But no figure was visible. Until long past dawn the two kept watch, their eyes red-rimmed and aching, but a cold pale sky and desolate peaks of Vorangowl mocked them with their emptiness.

Broome had watched narrowly in all the long hours for some change in Alan, too; but it did not come. The day passed and the fourth night passed. Dawn of the fifth day approached. Broome and Maisry once more shared the vigil, for he had warned her it was the most pregnant of the twenty-four hours.

The Picture showed the same chill breadth of sky and sharp-toothed crags. The rest was veiled. It was in Alan's face that Broome read indication of a crisis. Its indescribable look of sphinx-like, age-old remoteness was softened. The eyelids no longer gave the impression of carven lids that covered sightless eyes; they seemed merely to have drooped in sleep. A warmer, fuller outline curved cheek and jaw and temples.

"Alan! Alan!"

"No." Broome curtly stopped her. "It is the Picture you must watch. It is the door he must pass through to his body."

Round a tall spur of rock they saw a dark speck moving. Slowly—oh, very slowly—it came on. Impossible to see its

face, its outline, or any distinguishing mark at all, but both knew at once who struggled there up on the heights of Vorangowl.

"Bring him back! Bring him back with all your will." Broome spoke to the trembling girl beside him but kept his eyes on the Picture. "He's done! You and I must give him strength—his is spent, and overspent."

They watched the efforts of the far-off lonely figure and tried to fight back their own despair. The road stretched so endlessly—so endlessly. . . . Would that halting, stumbling traveler, so miraculously returning—would he ever reach his bourn?

Now it was full dawn in the green leafy actual world outside the Keep. Birds shook the spell of silence into sound. Long rosy fingers of sunlight thrust through an east window and touched the dusty floor. The candles, paling ghostly sentries, burned on.

Dawn too, it seemed, in the changing Picture. Behind Alan the sky grew light, throwing sun and shadow on the heights he had passed. But in front of him the road wound into mist and shadows—shadows that fell blackest and most impenetrably into the deep gorge which the cliff-path skirted.

Once more that haunted cliff-path must be crossed. Could Alan traverse it? Could he control his swooning weariness on its sharp edge?

"Good, ah, good! His will holds firm."

Broome's voice sank to a deep exultant note as they saw Alan drop on hands and knees to crawl along the path. Maisry watched with pain too overpowering for tears. She spoke to him as if he were close beside her, as if she trod the path before him.

"Dear—it is half-way now. We will rest on the other side. Follow, follow me—a little more—a little more. Ah, you will not let me go alone—Alan! Alan! Come with me . . . come. . . ."

Broome marveled at her. And Alan's face lifted as if he saw her on the path before him; now and again he put out a hand as if to touch her own. It was full noon when at last he reached the end of the path and lay on the heather slopes beyond.

UNTIL sunset, Maisry coaxed and pleaded and besought the figure on the painted Picture. With Broome beside her, aiding her strength, her wisdom, she fought for Alan, bringing him mile after weary mile along the dark glen road, bringing him back across the cursed painted miles from hell, back to the warmth and beauty of his own green earth, to her and to her love.

The sun sank low, and lower. And still Alan was outside the gates of Gorm. Candlelight showed him on the endless road, swaying and lurching with weariness beyond control. More than once he fell, but rose and stumbled on in answer to Maisry's low entreating words of love. Then at last he fell and did not rise; he seemed deaf to her voice, her pleadings, her tenderness.

Behind him, the long road was clear of mist and shadow, but the foreground he had not yet passed still lay obscure and dark.

Maisry turned imperiously to her companion.

"A chair! Put one close that I may touch him, help him up again."

He saw her climb and lean close until her hands could touch the exhausted broken figure lying on the road. Close, close to the painted wall, her moving tender hands seemed to raise, to lift him to his feet. Once more, miraculously, he dragged himself forward—on—on to the gates of Gorm. He reached them, passed

through and was swallowed up in velvet darkness of the trees.

No shred of mist remained in all the Picture. In its foreground, the gray Keep abruptly thrust up, grim, boding, expectant.

Dimly in the starlight, someone bulked faintly, uncertainly upon the battlements. Broome's lips formed a word:

"Alan!"

The name died on a sudden breath of horror. It was not Alan who so monstrously obscured the stars. It was a heavier figure. It moved, turned, thrust forward a great head. Ah, that demon's face, that flaming beard and hair!

Broome leaped to Maisry's side, to draw her away, to interpose himself between her—leaning forward, her golden head and lovely face not a foot from the painted Keep—and the peering lustful mask. But she resisted him, thrust back his hands, turned a changed face and eyes that flashed like swords full on Red Alastair. She was a golden flame of anger.

"Go back!" her voice rang in the echoing room like bugles blown for war. "Dead cursed thing—go back to your own hell! Dead—defeated—forgotten ghost! I am not afraid! Back—back to hell!"

The thing upon the tower roof shrank, wavered, dwindled in the starlight. Maisry's eyes pierced it, followed it, tortured it. The monstrous bulk grew vaporous, insubstantial as a web, a dusty cobweb flung on the massive wall. The web, caught by a breath of wind, was torn from its last slight moorings—tossed from the Keep—drifted from sight. . . .

At it vanished, the Picture cracked across and across. Its painted scene faded, dissolving, disintegrating, obliterated by the all-pervading dust of centuries. In a moment, nothing remained of outline or of color. Above the hearth, a cracked and moldering wall showed in the golden candle-light.

Maisry sprang down, caught Broome's arm.

"Now he can come to me! Now I am free! Alan! Alan! Alan!"

She knelt beside the truckle-bed. Alan lay still. He seemed to sleep, to dream. A faint smile curved his lips, and his heavy eyelids quivered. Maisry kissed the curving lips, the fluttering eyelids, until the dark eyes opened wide. His voice was a faint exhausted whisper.

"You came for me. You brought me home. I could not have won back—alone. Your voice—dearest—I followed it—your voice—your little hands. . . ."

His eyes closed in weakness, then opened once again.

"I tried to warn you, to tell you he was coming too. It was forbidden—I was not allowed! If you had been afraid—he would have had power—to stay. We had to fight—together, my beloved—together. . . ."

He sank back to deep oblivion and sleep. Maisry, crouched beside him, let her head fall on the hands that clasped his own. Sleep folded her too, softly, suddenly.

# The Last Archer

By EARL PEIRCE, JR.

*One of the strangest stories ever written—a tale that begins in the time of Richard the Lion-Hearted and the Crusades, and ends in our own day*

"Oh, many a shaft at random sent
Finds mark the archer little meant!"
—Scott.

FIFTH DAY (At sea). It has been five days since I made the acquaintance of William Farquhar. Five days! It seems like more than a lifetime. I am richer now than ever before in my career, for he pays me generously. But what a strange business! Who is this man? Where is he taking me?

He tells me nothing, and yet in his glance there is a wisdom to answer all questions of all ages, if it could but speak. There is a sadness about him, a hopelessness foreign to other men. He talks to me of poetry, of battles, and the history of great crusades; but of himself, never a word. Perhaps I should be afraid of him; perhaps I should resign from his weird employ. Yet I am curious.

When he first came to my room on that black night, as if he had emerged from the very shadows about me, he laid ten thousand dollars on my desk and told me it was his retainer. His retainer! His word is true, for he has since doubled the sum, and promised me more when my task is finished. But this task of mine? I feel I am cheating him.

It is not really a task, for any engineer could do it better than I. He desires me to install an electric generator in his island home, a generator which he bade me purchase, and for which he paid a small fortune. He told me to buy all accessories, for I must install the machine by myself, without help of any kind. At this very moment the generator is in the hold below deck, and with it those many queer boxes which Farquhar himself directed over from the wharf.

We have been at sea for three days, and it is now early evening of the third. My stateroom is comfortable to the point of luxury. I have no wants, save the answers to countless questions. But I must wait for the answers.

We are now cruising in the Gulf Stream, and the weather is mildly warm, although it is midwinter. The boat makes good headway, the service is exceptional, the passengers interesting and cordial. Today I met several people, and all of them questioned me about Farquhar. So it seems that I am not alone in my curiosity about this strange man.

Nor has the captain himself overlooked my companion's eccentricities. At dinner this evening he engaged me in discreet conversation, and asked several blunt questions. "Why," he said, "does your friend, Mr. Farquhar, never come for his meals? Why does he lock himself in his room all day long, leaving it only after sundown?"

Why indeed? Five days ago I met him, and during all of that time I have never once seen him taste a morsel of food, nor have I obtained a glimpse of him during the hours of sunlight. Why this erratic behavior? What does he hide behind the locked doors of his stateroom?

Of Farquhar's business I know nothing. I even doubt if he has one, for he

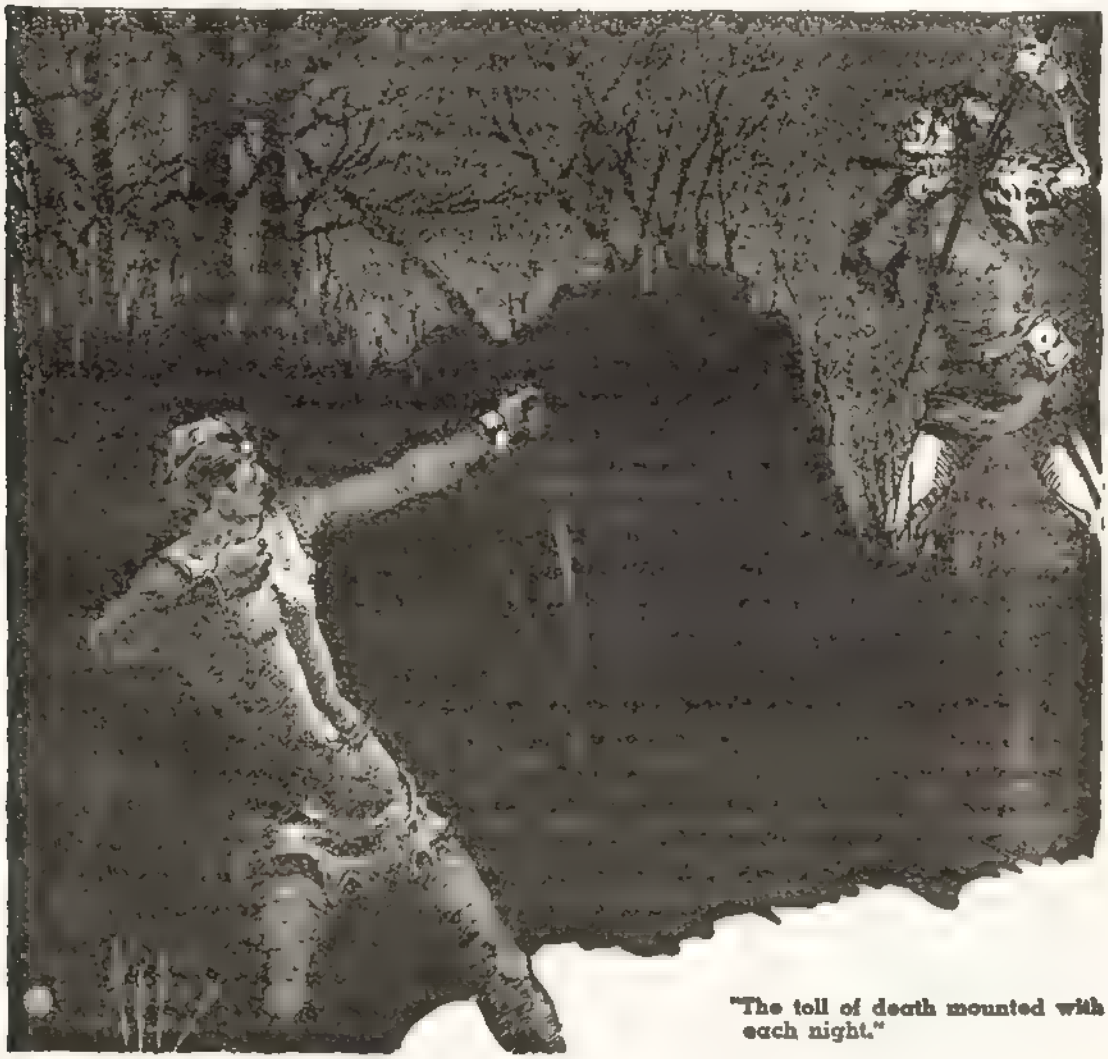
possesses the careless air of a wealthy sportsman. Yes, Farquhar must certainly be a sportsman, for his body is lean and agile, and he is muscular, with a decided swiftness of line. His face too—he has a weather-beaten face of tough leather, and his eyes are permanently narrowed, as of a man who has spent long hours facing winds and rain. Sportsman? I might better suggest, *hunter*.

Where is he taking me? The question pounds incessantly at my ear-drums. To some island, he once told me. But *what* island? I have questioned the captain and found that our route is dotted with small islands, inhabited and uninhabited, civilized and barbarous. And only this evening I learned that the ship was steaming off her main course, headed into sparsely charted seas.

"Farquhar's millions," said the purser with a smile. "The orders have come direct from the New York office."

So it appears that Farquhar has changed the course of this great ship to suit his ends. It becomes stranger with each passing hour. . . .

I HAVE just this moment received word from the captain. We are at last approaching our destination, for Farquhar has laid his maps on the chart table and



"The toll of death mounted with each night."

given his instructions. Our speed has been cut in half, passengers line the rail and peer vainly into the darkness of the surrounding water.

I have been requested to pack my luggage and prepare to assist in the disembarkation. A voltaic tension seems to have come over the entire boat; the night air is hushed by it.

Ah! Captain Lionel sent word again. Farquhar has ordered the ship to a position three miles due north. There is a solitary island there, as indicated on the map: *Durance Island.* A mere speck of ink in the whole ocean! We shall disembark at Durance Island. . . .

I must hurry and record these final impressions. My steward is packing for me, and the crane on deck is flooded with light. They have already begun to lift our luggage from the hold. Through the open window I can hear the seamen's voices, oddly strained. Above them I can hear Farquhar, softly decisive. The screws are throbbing gently, like the whispered comment of hundreds of passengers.

Well, I have learned that four boats are to be lowered. Four! It appears that Farquhar has no servants on Durance Island, for it is a black mass out there, almost swallowed by the sky and sea.

My bags have been taken out on deck. I can hear the squeak of pulleys as the boats are lowered. It is almost time to depart. I am here in my stateroom, alone with my diary—a diary which some strange impulse caused me to prepare on the night I first met this man and learned his uncanny request.

What can I say? What parting words can I write? What impressions?

The steward has just knocked at my door. I must hurry.

Hurry! They tell me to hurry, for Farquhar has commanded that the complete disembarkation take place before an hour of dawn.

What will I find on Durance Island? What does Farquhar want with the generator? These, and other questions, shoot through my head. I must ask myself: Who is Farquhar? I must repeat the question: *What* is Farquhar?

SIXTH DAY (A continuation from last night). If I should live to be a thousand I could never forget the things I have seen in the past twenty-four hours. They are bizarre and weird beyond all comparison. In ways they frighten me; yet still I am intrigued and curious.

To describe in detail all I have seen would exhaust my ability. It exhausts my tired mind even to think of them. Yet, however fatigued, I dare not lie down tonight until I have recorded, in some manner, the chronology of these strange events.

The *S. S. Celtic* dropped anchor at ten o'clock last night within several hundred yards of Durance Island. There was no moon, and it was slightly foggy, and heavy billows rolled the sea, although not large enough to endanger the four boats which transported us to the shore. By midnight all of our luggage had been removed from the *Celtic,* and we had made our salutations to the captain.

Even before I stepped foot on the beach, I felt the impregnability of this place. In that darkness I could discern no landmarks save the towering blackness of the cliffs, and could hear but the lapping of the waves upon its shore; yet I sensed its presence more than I saw or heard it. The seamen who manned our boats experienced the same eery sensation, for I could not help but notice the half-sluggish reluctance with which they pulled on the oars.

Farquhar was standing in the bow of the farthest boat, his arms crossed on his massive chest. He issued terse commands

to the men, and as we neared the island I saw his head go higher and higher as he gazed at the cliff-top. Strangely enough, his attitude seemed that of brave defiance. Defiance of what? Of whom? It was impossible for me to say.

When Farquhar's boat scraped the beach he leaped out and gave immediate aid in hauling it aground. He fairly jerked the craft from the water onto the sand, then waded in to his waist and assisted the others.

Not many minutes after my foot first touched the soil, I became alarmingly aware of Durance Island's unnatural silence. Disregarding the grunts of the men, and Farquhar's commands, and the wash of the sea, Durance Island was a place of uncanny silence. There was not a single chirping of an insect, not a creaking bough, not a noise from its darkness. It was absolutely and hauntingly *soundless.*

But I had no time to linger over these things. The boats had been unloaded, and the various odd crates and boxes were lined up under flash-lanterns so that Farquhar might examine them.

I walked over by the group of men who stood anxiously awaiting further orders, and caught the glance of one grizzled sailor whom I recognized as a lesser officer. There was a look of mingled wonder and fear in his eyes, which seemed to pop them from his head. He looked squarely back at me for several seconds, then turned his head toward the sea. I saw his lips tremble as they choked back the words which had risen uncontrollably to his mouth.

I was about to speak to him, when suddenly I saw the same thing that he had seen. It struck me with a quick panic, and my knees weakened as if their tendons had been severed. For lying on the ground by a cluster of other boxes was a long black box with two metal handles on each side by which it might be lifted. It was oblong in shape, slightly over six feet long, and obviously quite ancient. In the glow of the lanterns I perceived the metallic glint of hinges on one side of the upper surface.

Perhaps all of the men had noticed this singularly coffin-shaped crate, and when the time came to transport the luggage to the top of the cliff they shunned it as they would shun Pandora's box. Farquhar himself lifted that crate to his shoulders and with comparative ease led the men up the mountainous path.

It was a tricky, dangerous climb. Alternate men held lanterns to light the way and warn us of its countless cracks and fissures. In fifteen minutes the ten of us emerged from the overhanging rock arbors to the summit of the bluff, and stopped there, exhausted, while the sea-breeze played over our sweating faces.

After a few minutes' rest Farquhar shouldered his box and led the men farther on, climbing still upward. I was just behind him with my personal luggage, and was the first of the men to see our destination. I stopped so short in surprize that the man behind me collided into my back with a grunt.

Before us, on top of an incline, rose the black cheerless wall of a stone castle, humped with parapets and crowned with a single lofty tower. It was a bulky castle of thick stone, compact to such a degree that it appeared solid. There was not a single light shining from it, and no sign of inhabitation or activity.

Farquhar, almost at the castle's wall, stopped and turned around. He jerked his head for us to follow, then lowered his crate to the ground with tender care. I saw his face in the feeble glow of the lamplight, and cannot well enough describe the exalted defiance that seemed written there.

I shall not take the pains to relate of the long and torturous vigil as the eight men, Farquhar and I traced up and down the path, hauling strange boxes to the castle, and of the one man who slipped and fell, dashing his head to pulp on the rocks below. Nor need I say how eagerly the seamen finally shoved their boats back into the water and rowed to the *Celtic*. For all of these things lose their importance from what I am yet to relate, of that second stone castle which stood on an identical cliff on the opposite side of the island.

When the last boat had pulled away from our shore, and when we saw the lights of the steamship as it moved through the water, a hitherto unnoticeable sensation of familiarity came between Farquhar and me. He discarded his cloak of remote sovereignty and grasped my shoulders in a brotherly gesture.

"You are not to be afraid," he said. "This is a queer place, but hospitable and quiet. Your work on the generator should not take you more than three or four days, and within a week the *Celtic* will pick you up on her return voyage. I regret that you can have no manual assistance in your task, but you and I are the sole inhabitants of this castle—which I have named Camelot. You are my welcome guest; I shall do everything to make your stay pleasant."

He led me up the time-worn steps to the upper hall, to my bedroom which had doubtless been prepared in advance of my coming. At this time it was almost three o'clock, pitch black outside, and deathly silent.

I went immediately to the luxurious bed and dropped on it with a sigh of utter exhaustion. Farquhar was most sympathetic and considerate, having brought to my room a decanter of excellent brandy and a box of cigarettes.

"Following my usual custom," he said, "I shall be unapproachable during the hours of sunlight, and so tomorrow you will be quite alone in Camelot; yet have no fear. I have left instructions on the table in the library concerning the generator, and you will find, in the morning, a well-stocked kitchen. Please adapt yourself to these irregularities of etiquette, and make yourself as comfortable as you may."

He bade me good-night and left the room. I heard his footsteps as he went back downstairs; then I swallowed a glass of cognac and prepared for bed. But once beneath the silken coverlet I could not sleep, and had no wish to do so. I lay with my head upon my folded hands staring up at the blackness of the room. My brain raced ahead of itself trying to piece together these things which I had done and seen.

Not more than an hour later I heard Farquhar's tread on the stone floor outside. Aroused from the lethargy into which I had fallen, I slipped out of bed and tiptoed to the door. I drew back the bolt quietly, and opened the door scarcely an inch.

Coming up the steps from below, illuminated by a lantern in one hand, was Farquhar. His huge body was draped in a black cape, and his head and face were hidden by a cowl. In his spare hand he held an enormous longbow and a sheaf of arrows. He passed unsuspecting across my door and vanished into the gloom of the hallway adjacent.

A pang of sudden fear shot through me at this moment, for Farquhar's tread had been so stealthy, so determined, that I sensed something *vicious* in his actions. I locked the door and went fumbling toward my suitcase, wherein was my sole defense against this man—an automatic Luger.

I was at the foot of my bed when suddenly I stopped. I looked incredulously through the open window; then I raced to the sill and stood staring into the blackness of the island.

There was a lighted lantern out there —a solitary lantern hanging in the darkness. I peered closer, and as my eyes widened, I saw the vague, mist-enshrouded outline of a castle. I saw that the lantern was hanging from the castle wall.

How far away this dwelling was I could not determine because of the darkness. It seemed to stand on the prominence of a cliff, just as Farquhar's castle stood. On the top was a tall machicolated tower, as there was on Camelot. A sort of fog hung over the castle, twisting and warping its bulky walls as a nightmare twists and warps a vision. But clearly I saw its lantern glowing brighter, and dimming suddenly as wreaths of fog closed over it.

I stood looking at this uncanny dwelling for only a few seconds, when I saw a shadowy figure appear on its balcony, dim, hazy, minute, yet the black figure of a man standing on the parapeted balcony.

At that moment I heard the scraping of Farquhar's feet on the stone near by. I leaned out of the window and glanced along the side of the castle. There he was, not ten feet away from me, standing on an identical parapeted balcony. He was like a cowled phantom, his sharp eyes staring intently at the castle opposite. Then he, too, must have seen that hazy figure, for he stood motionless for several horrible seconds, then leaned forward and drew an arrow from the quiver by his feet. He notched it in his bow-string.

I was scarcely able to credit my senses as I watched this weird spectacle. My gaze was torn between Farquhar and that man across the way, and the powerful longbow in Farquhar's hands.

My host moved closer to the parapet and leaned out. He was slightly inclined as he sought out that man's position; then suddenly he straightened upright and raised the bow to his shoulder. His Herculean arms drew it out and back, bent it in a huge arc. He raised his pointed chin and took careful aim.

I moved back as the arrow shot like a bullet from his bow. Upward and out it went, a hissing, wicked shaft of unerring death for whomever it might strike. And I waited in breathless terror to hear the shriek of its victim.

But not Farquhar's arrow alone shot into that night, for less than a second afterward I heard the faint twang of a second bow-string, and the head of a second arrow thudded into the stone wall below my window.

I jumped back in alarm, my pistol raised in my hands. I cowered beside the window, listening, fearing at any moment to see an arrow—from whose bow I cannot say—fly like death past my shoulders.

After two minutes of silence I became less cautious and ventured to look through the window. The figure on the opposite castle was standing upright, and I could discern his movements as he selected a second arrow for his bow. I then turned to Farquhar, and saw that he, too, was notching another deadly missile, and stepping closer to the parapet.

In dull amazement I drew back from the window and dropped on the bed. Two archers! Two nightly archers fighting each other to the death from two opposing castles on a deserted isle! What a nightmarish thing! What a bizarre thing!

I dropped the Luger onto the bed and took my head in my hands. My mind was shaking with disbelief, it throbbed from fatigue. But I could not force out the sounds of Farquhar's slashing bow-strings, nor the repeated thuds of his

enemy's arrows as they shot back into the walls of Camelot.

When I awoke from a deep sleep late this morning, I had almost forgotten the strange battle which Farquhar and this nameless man waged silently across the island. It was nearly midday, the sunlight streamed in warm rays through the window, and the ocean breeze came pleasantly to my nostrils. My head was clear, but I felt insufferably hungry.

As I bathed and dressed I was annoyed by this place's unearthly silence. I felt that there was no other human being on this whole island save myself. And most of all I regretted the strange lack of servants.

Before I left my room, I glanced out on the balcony beside my window. I saw that its floor was cracked and crumbly, and that it was nicked where arrows had struck. Buried in the walls, above and below, were splintered arrows. But of Farquhar there was no trace.

I spent several minutes staring at the castle outside. It was small and compact, perhaps not five hundred yards' distance from Camelot. Between the two castles was a swampy forest of strange vegetation. There were no sounds down there. The sickening miasma of stagnation drifted to my window.

I went to the kitchen and made my breakfast.

After having washed and dried the dishes, I was aware that the kitchen of Camelot was a place equipped to serve but one—myself. All of the food and cooking-utensils were new; they had just recently been unpacked by Farquhar himself. His empty pantry was cobwebbed and dusty from disuse.

Could I any longer doubt that this man never ate a meal?

I went directly to the library and read the instructions which he had left there for me. In a handwriting swift and scratched, on vellum parchment, he told me of the manner in which he desired that I install the generator. And from his wording, I suspected that he knew far more of technical electricity than even I did.

He also wished me a good-morning, and repeated his hospitable request that I make myself at home among his possessions. As a final point, reminding me of the death of the *Celtic's* seaman last night, he advised me not to leave the castle. He would, he said, meet me again after sundown.

Almost at once I felt a surging wonder. Where was Farquhar? Where and *how* did he keep himself during the daytime? And the answer to my questions came to me as I remembered the stories told of vampires. . . .

I searched the basement floor of Camelot and found neither hide nor hair of the man. I went to the dungeons where shattered wooden slats and excelsior littered the floor, and still no trace. I smelled the stench of damp earth, and was sent up again by driving fears. I then went to the balcony where he had stood firing his arrows, and saw only the *other's* arrows chinked in the walls. Finally I climbed the steps to the tower and saw Farquhar lying fast asleep in the black wooden coffin—the same coffin which he himself had carried up the rocky path.

I looked closely at his body, a great long body wrapped in a black mantle. His face was grim and peaceful, a sharp, large-boned face with a wolfish jaw. There was a greenish tint to his skin, and his thin lips were almost black. But I did not feel fear.

Farquhar's kindliness needed no further demonstration. Although aloof, he had been generous and cordial. Yet as I

turned my back to descend the stairs, I thought: Perhaps I am an unforgivable fool for not tearing his heart out as he lies here at my mercy!

I had no wish to disregard Farquhar's warning that I do not leave the castle, but as I stepped out of the front door and surveyed the scene before me, I had a desperate urge to pocket my Luger and explore the place.

I was surprized at first to see how small Durance Island was. From where I stood I could see the ocean in every direction. Directly ahead of me, even closer than I had imagined from my window, the second castle reared its battle-scarred tower into the sky like a deformed finger pointing. I could see that this castle was worn and ancient, just as Farquhar's was. I wondered what type of man it was who held domination there—alone or with others, I knew not which—but who lived as Farquhar lived and fired his arrows as Farquhar did.

There was no sign of life or habitation in the dwelling; it was as lifeless as Camelot behind me. Between these mediæval places the jungle of trees grew like a solid barrier.

I then turned my observation back to Camelot and walked slowly about its base, wondering how inconceivably ancient it was. In the ground outside were arrows, half-way buried in the earth, others stuck in the walls, others lay splintered as they had bounded from the battlements. I saw huge stone buttresses, like massive oaks, sprawled against the tower. Some little grass and a few brown shrubs grew close by, but no flowers. In the rear the cliff dropped a jagged three hundred feet to the sea.

I shaded my eyes against the sun. Out on this water, for countless miles in every direction, white breakers rose and fell like snarling lips. No other land was visible save Durance Island, upon which I stood. No sign of the *Celtic*.

It was after three o'clock before I went back to the castle and prepared a light luncheon. I then re-read Farquhar's instructions about the generator, and went below to refer to my notes and blueprints. Farquhar himself came down a little after six o'clock, and expressed his good wishes at finding me all ready to install the machine.

While I ate supper, which he helped me prepare, I could hardly resist the urge to ask him outright of the castle opposite, and of its uncanny archer-lord. But something about him, as he studied my lowered lids, frightened me off.

TONIGHT the silent battle raged violently between these two men. I sat for hours watching Farquhar train his bow across the marsh and let his arrows fly with deadly swiftness. He seemed unaware of my scrutiny—oblivious of everyone and everything excepting that dim figure across the way. Arrow after arrow he fired into the night, and arrow after arrow shot back deep-headed around him. What ghastly miracle, I wondered, is it that prevents Farquhar from being stabbed a thousand times!

I trained my observation upon the man in the castle opposite, but it was too dark to distinguish his features. I saw only a blurred dark figure, cloaked as Farquhar was cloaked, bending his bow and letting his arrows fly, time after time.

There was hardly a sound as these men worked their mad game. The sea crashed distantly below us, the bow-strings played their own shrill sonata, but from Farquhar himself there was no noise—no despair exhibited in his actions, no malice and no impatience. Each time he drew on his bow, his chin was raised high and a curious light invaded his sunken eyes. And when his shaft fell short he simply

lowered his head as he reached for another.

Once, after midnight, an arrow flew straight to Farquhar's arm and pierced it through, so that half was sticking in and half was out. He stopped and grimaced, not from apparent pain but from annoyance, and grasping the shaft by its head, he pulled it all the way through his arm and flung it over the parapet. Without again glancing at the hole thus torn in his flesh, he notched an arrow in his bow-string, drew it back to his shoulder and let it spring like a panther into the night.

All of these things I saw; then I sickened and turned away from the window. I am still sick from the sight of it, and hardly able to hold the pen in my hand. . . .

It is late, and I have been sitting here for hours. Tonight I have written far more than I had planned; yet I do not feel that I have written enough. Even at this moment I can hear Farquhar outside, and hear the other arrows as they shoot back from across the island. Perhaps one will fly through the window and strike me dead.

Ah, I am so fatigued! It is all like a fabulous dream, but I know it is not. Farquhar no longer frightens me, but it is that weird being across the marsh—what manner of man is he? Tomorrow I must cross the island and see that man for myself.

Yes, tomorrow. . . .

SEVENTH DAY. I am lost in an endless maze, and my brain is sore from trying to think my way out. A horrid fear is coming over me—I feel it plainly; a symptomatic weakness of the soul, a dread. I have seen and heard things today which shake my innermost being. This creature, Farquhar—in God's name—*what is he?*

This morning I awoke late in a bed drenched with sweat. The horrible dreams I cannot recall, save that my second night in Camelot was the most fearful of all my life. What will it be tomorrow night? Can I bear to live through the morrow?

I am getting out of hand. My thoughts wander, my pen scratches esoteric thoughts. I must collect myself and think this through. I must be coherent! . . .

I awoke after eleven o'clock and ate a hasty breakfast. I climbed to the tower and saw Farquhar silent in his coffin. I examined closely the wound in his arm. Of course! There was no blood, no inflammation! God in Heaven! Why had I never noticed this before? Farquhar's flesh is no ordinary flesh! It is a bloodless flesh, like moist and kneady clay.

Today his skeletal countenance was the same as yesterday. His eyelids appeared stiff, as in death, and his cheeks were sunken. I noticed, too, that his face was scratched and furrowed with long, jagged lines—like the slashing cuts of battle long healed over.

I worked a little with the generator, but I was shaking with impatience to commence my exploration. At one o'clock I slipped the Luger under my belt and stepped out of the front door.

The sky was cloudless, and the ocean smooth as glass. There were no sounds at all, and there was no breeze. The tower of the castle opposite stood up clearly in the sky; the fog had lifted from it, and I could see its crumbled stone in greater detail. And yet I could not dispel that transparency of mist that hovered before my vision.

I walked slowly down the decline that led to the edge of the forest. There was not an insect to be seen—not a bird—not an animal of any nature.

The ground was clay-like at first, but grew soggy as I proceeded. The trees

grew denser, like living things that seemed to force me back with every step I took. Ferns grew enormous from the ground, fungi cluttered the scabrous bark of fallen trees, and the stench of swamp stagnation became heavier in my nostrils. Soon the sunlight was blackened out by the matted shrubbery above.

I climbed over and under uprooted trees; up, sometimes, into their very branches and down the other side. I hacked away thick shrubs, and trampled down branches and weeds that choked my legs. It seemed a work of hours, and the forest was so dense and solid that I could hear my echo resounding far ahead. I was scratched and bleeding in a dozen stinging wounds.

At one point I stopped long enough to examine my position. I had reached a clearing in the trees—a sort of grassy hillock—and stood upon it turning my gaze in all directions. The forest was black around me; black and hot and silent. I could see only the very top of Camelot behind me, and on the other side just the tower of the farther castle. I was just half-way there. I redoubled my efforts and pushed ahead.

It took me another hour or more before I felt myself climbing upward. Slowly and torturously at first, then easier as the foliage thinned, I drew closer to the castle. Finally I shook the marsh soil from my shoes and tramped up the grassy embankment.

A silence more awesome than before came upon me. That haze of illusion seemed more dominant. I stood shaking, staring upward.

How alike these dwellings were! As if they had been made at the same time from identical plans—and with the same stone blocks and wooden beams! A squat castle, compact almost to solidity, crowned by a single lofty tower, and bruised with the same water-yellowed fissures. I felt an unhealthy fear that these castles were too much alike!

I walked cautiously up the incline to the very door. It was half-way open, and the fear grew stronger in the pit of my stomach. I entered the hallway, and stood agape. These castles were the same. They had the same aged furniture, the same fireplace and mantel, the same tarnished candelabra. And that same dread silence!

I stood breathless, wondering what move to make next—to run from this place, or to seek out its host. I steadied my nerve. There was nothing yet to fear. I had met no obstacle, no sign of this man's presence.

Perhaps, I thought, he, too, sleeps during the hours of sunlight. Perhaps, like Farquhar, this archer also has a coffin for his bedroom high in the tower. With soundless steps I climbed the winding stairs.

I reached the upper floor, and was more and more amazed by its resemblance to Camelot. I found the door to the tower without difficulty, and moved up quickly. The room above had the same brownstone circular walls, it had the same narrow slotted windows cut into them like firing-holes. On a stone bench rested an identical black coffin, and lying within it——

I stepped closer and bent over. I was staring into the face of William Farquhar!

When I had firmly convinced myself that this was no hallucination, when I had studied those tragic features, when I had seen the wound in that clay-like arm—when these things happened, I tore back down the steps and fell crashing on the stone floor below.

I went directly, numbed, and shaken, to the room beside the balcony. I stood at the threshold for several seconds, then

I felt surging laughter rising in my throat. This was my *own* room. This was the room which Farquhar had shown me on that first night in Camelot. This *was* Camelot!

When I had sobered from splitting laughter, I walked to the window and looked out. I stared down at the jungle of trees—that impenetrable jungle—and up at the castle beyond. It was the same, all the same. Somehow, in that maze of shrubbery, I had lost my bearings and come back to my exact starting-point. Perhaps some monstrous thing down there had driven me back! At the thought of it, at the thought of my anxiety as I had climbed the stairs, I broke out with increased laughter—and spent the remainder of the afternoon trying to shake the daze from my mind.

I SAID nothing of all this to Farquhar when he came down a little after six. I told him that a splitting headache had kept me from the generator, and that tomorrow I would be back at work. He took no offense, and appeared quite as cordial and considerate as always. I suppose it was this very cordiality which prompted me to do as I did, but I finally broke the bounds of my patience and asked him some direct questions.

"Who is that man across the marsh?" I asked. "And why do you and he wage battle every night? Why don't you bleed when an arrow strikes you? And why—in God's name—if you want to kill that man, don't you take a rifle and get it over with?"

I supposed it was Farquhar's turn to laugh, but he didn't. He only smiled—a hopeless and forgiving smile—and poured me a glass of wine and offered a cigarette.

"You would not understand," he said. "You would not understand any more than people understand why a Jew has been wandering the earth for over nineteen hundred years."

"Are you wandering the earth? And for how long?"

Farquhar sighed deeply and pointed at a plaque that hung over the mantel.

"Those arms," he said, "depict the forgotten herald of Sir Guillaume de Farquhar, once knight-envoy to Richard, whom we call the Lion-Hearted. Centuries ago those same arms were carried across Moslem sands to the very gates of Jerusalem, where they marked the presence of Guillaume de Farquhar—a man whose hatred of the Saracens wrought terrible fear throughout the land, a man who, in three days' battle, killed three score of the enemy with his own hands.

"To inform you of what occurred on that fateful day will be to break a silence five centuries old. But what matter? What man would believe?

"Sir Guillaume de Farquhar, however respected in the eyes of his Prince, was a boastful and cruel man. He went, not like others in the Crusades, for the love of the Cross, but for the glory of battle and war. He would slash his way through ranks of Saracens like a double-bladed plow; hacking and hewing his way to the blood-spattered walls of the city, there only to be repulsed by outnumbering enemies.

"He made many captives, and had immense loot of jeweled daggers and precious stones—spoils of war for which he would sacrifice no end of human lives. It was Farquhar's habit to go out alone across the near-by sand dunes to seek his quarry—single or multiple it mattered not—so that his thirst for blood might be sated. Vain! Cruel!

"That one day—that one day for ever set aside! See how it shakes my breath to say these things! See how I pale to the very eyes at the vision of it! It was on the Sabbath, and the Holy Armies knelt in

prayer; knights, emperors, and yeomen alike. The defending wall at a short distance was bristling with spears, the sun gleamed like molten gold upon the helmets of the heathens. A curious silence had fallen, undisturbed except by the groans of the wounded who lay like split logs half smothered in the sand. It was on this day that Guillaume de Farquhar set out alone.

"Why did he go? Or where? These questions are unanswered. He bore a great broadsword at his side, and in his hands—accursed man!—he carried his longbow, notched with a cloth-yard arrow.

"He walked toward the sun over small hillocks of sand, his keen eyes alert for a hapless foe. Ah! There, not a hundred yards' distance, he saw three of them ministering to the dying. They were garbed in the robes of black priesthood, and from their lips droned the deistical rites of heathen sorcery.

"What folly raced through Farquhar's mind! Scarcely had he seen these exorcists when he let fly an arrow to pierce one through the throat. Scarcely had these other two known their fate, when a second arrow laid one dead. The third, whose ornamental hood marked him as the superior monk, fell forward on his face and cried aloud for mercy.

"Farquhar's arrow twitched in his fingers. An impulse goaded him to slay this one on the spot, and yet the gloat of victory stayed his hand. He strove forward, and kicked the whining heathen in his head, and laughed aloud at his cowering protestations.

"The captive—such an aged and patriarchal man! His face was a yellowed parchment traced with lines of age-long sacrifice. He was clean-shaven both upon the face and head, and a blackened wound upon his forehead gave evidence of his initiation into the Black Priory of his clan. He was small and thin, but his skull was enormous in proportion. His eyes were faded gray—nay! almost white with age, and he was toothless and black-lipped. He carried no weapons save the wooden staff that lay by his feet, and there were no jewels or amulets upon him except for the curious metal ring which encircled one scrawny finger.

"THE ring widened Farquhar's eyes when he saw it, for it was unusually thick and wide, and occupied nearly a third of the man's finger. On top was a polished red stone that seemed to shine out rays of light. On the sides were carved writings, doubtless religious scriptures of some eastern icon. But it was the jeweled light of the red stone which caught Farquhar's glance. He bent down to rip it from the captive's finger.

"The man shrieked damnation, and jerked his hand away. He squirmed and twisted at Farquhar's feet. A fury seemed to rise in him, unheeding and cautionless. He pushed Farquhar away as he scrambled upright.

"So suddenly had he risen that the Christian was taken aback by sheer astonishment, and the Moslem broke away and ran toward the walls of the city.

"How foolhardy of him! Farquhar waited until he had covered a hundred feet, then he raised his bow and fired an arrow through the man's back. He drew out his broadsword and walked slowly to his side.

"The shaft had pierced the Moslem's lungs and pinned them together like a rivet. His back and spine were twisted as he fell, and a thin runnel of blood drained from his chest and stained the sand beside him. He lay there thrashing his arms and kicking his feet. He bent up to arch his back, then fell down again, and his chest rose and fell to the accompaniment of the moans which came al-

most breathless from his sand-choked throat.

"Farquhar grimaced at the sight of him, but kept his gaze fixed gloatingly upon the graven ring. A tide of anger had engulfed his mind at the Moslem's daring rebuke to his power, and he resolved to let him die in the fullest agony of his wound, and to strip him of the talismanic ring only when his fading intellect alone could protest.

"The dying Saracen turned his eyes to Farquhar. His lips opened and closed; hushed words of pity came out. He begged—nay! he implored and pleaded that Farquhar send a second arrow into his heart to end his torture. But the Christian stood irresolute; this man must run his course.

"Vain! Cruel! Blasphemous! God curse the day this was done before his city! And God forgive the day! The Moslem's outstretched hands touched Farquhar's feet. He raised himself to his elbows so that his whispered voice might reach his conqueror's ears. His body trembled as he moved, but he had not the strength, and he fell face-downward again, driving the arrow still deeper through his lungs.

"He twisted and groaned. His voice was cracked with driving pain as he begged for Farquhar's mercy. 'An arrow through my heart!' he moaned. *'An arrow through my heart!'* But Farquhar stood irresolute.

"The dying man's eyes bulged out until Farquhar thought they would fly from his skull. There was blood and sand sticking to his lips as he twisted them into words of imploration. But Farquhar shook his head and leaned on the hilt of his sword, because it might be a long while before this man died. . . .

"Slowly, slowly death came upon the Moslem. He turned the shade of the plague-stricken, and shook from alternate fever and chills. He coughed from his bleeding lungs.

"Slowly, slowly he sank toward death, and with a last desperate energy he drew his hands together and twisted the ring upon his finger.

"What was this? What strange words did he mutter? Why did his dying eyes brighten with lurid fires even as a darkened cloud crossed the sun? He stared up past Farquhar's head—up to something far away. His voice rose higher with the shrill frenzy of some incantation, his fingers twisted and turned at the ring upon his finger.

"What ring was it? From whom? I know not. Perhaps it was the lost ring of Solomon. Perhaps it was the very ring with which that ancient king of Palestine conjured his familiar djinn and afrits. The strange tales told of Solomon are not too strange indeed for what occurred on those Moslem sands before Jerusalem. For djinn and afrits were many!

"The Saracen then spoke words to Farquhar aloud in French, of which he understood. His eyes were burning faggots in his skull, a new and terrible energy went through his frame, and he uttered these words of sovereign power:

" 'Thou shalt never again into the burning sun turn thy gaze. Thou shalt never again eat food nor drink, nor shalt thou lie with women. Never again, throughout eternity, shalt thou ever know solemn peace and contentment until an arrow from thine own bow and arm shall pierce through the living heart of the greatest archer of all the land—an archer nameless to you for evermore!'

"The malediction fell from the Moslem's lips like drops of venom from a viper's fangs, and each dripping word scorched into Farquhar's brain. He stood stark, unable to command either his senses or his muscles.

"The Saracen's last word was still on

his lips when a wind swept over the two men and blew a dust of sand through the air. The wind grew stronger, seeming to come from nowhere save directly overhead. It whirled around and around in slow circles, and grew faster with each second until it picked the sand up with it like a monstrous vacuum.

"Inside of this cone of sand and wind lay the Moslem, all but his eyes stricken dead; and outside stood Farquhar, agape and trembling from a chill he did not comprehend. The sword had fallen from his hand and he had covered his eyes from the rays of the sun.

"The whirlwind of sand grew faster, a geyser erupting from the earth. Crashes of thunder sounded from above, and inside there was a shrill whispering that was neither animal nor human. A fiercely cold wind swept across the desert and kicked the sand before it as if it bore a tortured soul of its own. The sky was blackened from view.

"Farquhar fell to his knees before the gale, his eyes still blinded by the filtered sunlight that fell upon him. He could no longer see the Moslem, but his ears were ringing with the unearthly noises that came from within the cone. Then a red light dazzled—a penetrating red light that shone through his lowered eyelids. It came like an explosion from behind the wall of driving sand; the air was turned red by it, the very sand itself brightened like crimson beads. For a whole minute the light flashed like a burning pyre, and then it was suddenly extinguished, and the frenzied whispering died into silence.

"How long Farquhar knelt with shaded eyes, he never knew. At the least it was many hours, for when he was first able to draw his hands away he saw that the sun had already set. The horizon about him was drawing closer and closer, and long purple shadows were sketched across the land.

"He saw immediately that he was alone. The Moslem had vanished, and only his crusted blood on the sand gave evidence of where he had lain. The wind had vanished too, and the air was calm and unnaturally silent.

"Farquhar rubbed his aching eyes. He looked searchingly in all directions, but the Moslem was nowhere to be seen. A hundred feet away were the stiffened bodies of the two slain priests and the bodies of fallen warriors. Still farther was the solid black mass of the city and the lights of torches.

"The sand at Farquhar's feet was ruffled by the imprint of his boots, and his naked sword lay as it had fallen from his hands. Near by the Moslem's blood had hardened like a horrible escutcheon painted on the sand. The whirlwind had touched none of these things; it had come and gone and left no trace, except for the disappearance of the priest!

*"But was it a whirlwind?*

"It had come suddenly from directly overhead and swept down on the Moslem like a huge bird. It had engulfed him, and its shrill voice had cursed or blessed him, and it had blazed like an inferno just before it vanished, and it had carried the priest off with it.

"Farquhar's ears were still ringing with the words of the dying Moslem. A heavy dread was on his mind, a compelling horror and desperation that shackled him to the sand at his feet. He turned slowly and headed toward the Christian camp, but each step he took was sweating drudgery. And every step he's taken since has been the same.

"From that very hour the curse of the Moslem began to work. His words had shaken Farquhar to his soul; a malignancy of spirit had invaded him and drove him relentlessly onward. On that

very night he tried to die on his own sword, but his strength deserted him. He has tried it since then, and he knows now that the words of the Moslem must be carried out to the letter.

"Late on that same night he wandered into his own tent, past his own sentries, who drew back aghast at his appearance. He tried to eat, but the food choked in his throat. He tried to sleep, but he tossed the whole night through, and the next morning he was blind.

"All day he was blind, and only at night did his brain find relaxation. But he could not sleep with other men, and that compelling force within his soul led him to the Christian burial ground. Each day he went there and slept in hallowed earth.

"Men loathed and feared him. Richard himself drew back with a feeling of awe and crossed himself, then pointed his sword at Farquhar in a gesture of banishment. He was driven from the camp, and the name of Farquhar was forbidden mention on the lips of men.

"Thuswise Guillaume de Farquhar commenced to endure the curse of the Moslem. In vain he searched for the greatest archer, and he slew not only Seljuk Turks, but Englishmen and Frenchmen alike. The toll of death mounted with each night, until when the months and years rolled by he became a legend of horror.

"He roamed only at night, and during the day he sought the dark shelters of subterranean vaults and tombs. He prayed until he was hoarse for the Moslem's forgiveness, and he cursed him with the vilest curses of his imagination—and then prayed again.

"Years followed years, and great changes came over Europe. The Crusades were ended, and new codes came into being, and new empires were formed on the crumbled ruins of the old. Firearms, swift and utter in their destruction, replaced the bow and arrow; but still this unhappy marksman wandered over Europe seeking the greatest archer. He killed countless more men, until the day came when there were no longer men with arrows, and the hopeless, tiring search seemed destined to endure throughout eternity.

"Perhaps the Moslem's gloating prescience grew kinder after many centuries, for Farquhar's steps were directed to a mystic isle in the sea. Upon this isle he found the archer who had eluded him through the centuries.

"Who is this archer? Is he a living, mortal man, or a demon sent by the Moslem's mockery? I do not know. Many are the nights that Farquhar has stood watching, hoping, praying. Many are the hours spent in trying to pierce the veil of mist that hovers between them. Is this other archer, like himself, accursed and set aside to battle throughout endless time? Did he, too, once meet a Moslem priest?

"The vigil of these men has never ended. They fight on and on, and only when the arrow of one has transfixed the heart of the other can the battle end. There is a weird, unexplainable kinship between them which unites their souls as one. They appear to meet each other during the sleeping hours in their coffins, like two phantoms in a rendezvous with death; for once these men met a common horror, and must share a common fate. They will never know each other, and their curiosity will never cease, until one arrow—from whom it does not matter—has reached its destined mark."

It is after midnight, and I am sitting in my room with these pages out before me. The horrible story of the Moslem priest has been unfolded in my diary as if Farquhar himself wrote it there. Each

word I can remember, and each word is here inscribed to testify to the soul-shaking things which happen. And even as I write I can feel that awful presence—a prescient evil that lurks within my room. Somehow, shaking as I write, I can sense the Moslem's watching eyes.

My hands are trembling, and I do not feel that I can write much longer. Even now I can hear Farquhar on the balcony outside as he slings his arrows across the island. And I can hear the other arrows as *he* shoots them back from across the way. These men have redoubled their efforts tonight; the air is singing with the twang of bow-strings.

I questioned Farquhar on many points tonight, but he will not commit himself. I questioned him of the history of Camelot Castle, and of this island, and of the man across the way. But he claims no knowledge of these things.

"Why am I here?" I asked him. "Why did you leave the island to buy an electric generator?"

It is better, he told me, to use powerful modern searchlights than mere lanterns in hunting down his foe. With lights glaring on the castle his aim would be truer, the flight of his arrows more certain.

And if he killed the other man, what then? But he did not know. Who—*who* is the other man? He did not know. Nor did he profess any desire to know.

But I shall know! Moslem or no Moslem! Be he madman, saint, or demon, tomorrow I shall know!"

EIGHTH DAY. It is ended, and I write these words from the light of a campfire on the beach. I dare not go back to Camelot; it is alone up there, alone and black and silent. The waves lap at the sand by my feet, the breeze of the sea is refreshing and soporific. I wait only for the lights of the *Celtic*.

To go back? To go back, in memory, to those hours? The very memory shakes me with a deathly fever. I would tear it from my brain if I knew how. I no longer ask myself who Farquhar is. But it is that Moslem—who—*what* is he? How can he do these things? What horror has he mastered?

I have been to that other castle—*or have I?* I have seen, close by, that shadowed archer on the balcony—*or have I?* I have crossed the tangled marsh and climbed the tower steps, I have dragged that archer from his lair, I have brought him to the very face of William Farquhar—*or have I?*

Oh merciful God, what things I have done this day!

I must go back to my awakening, that late hour of morning when I wrestled myself away from my dream and looked again at the sky and sea, so vast about me. I stared long and eagerly at the castle across the island, and it stood like a challenging thing, mocking me to approach it. The jungle below was lifeless and silent. There were no clouds in the sky and the air was clear. The air was so clear that I seemed to see these things in greater detail. The castle was like the very reflection of Camelot. I saw the same window beside the balcony in which I myself was standing.

I seemed to see a face there peering back at me with the same silent mockery. And I felt the premonitory horror of what was yet to come.

I ran swiftly down the stairs and stopped at the open door. From here I could see only the tower of the castle, for the gnarled trees grew like a wall before me. I stood hesitating, my muscles twitching with impatience.

Was it the fear of the priest which stopped me? Or did I fear that I would lose myself in the jungle again as I did yesterday? I wanted to run screaming

from the sight of it, yet a grim determination to reach that dwelling throbbed like a pulse in my conscience.

I went back to my room and got my pistol and a hatchet; then I forced myself to walk down the grassy slope to the edge of the forest. I went slowly, measuring my position from the door of Camelot. I kept my eyes reverting to the tower of the farther castle until the trees blinded it from view. And then it grew suddenly dark.

I hacked my way through in cold fury. I chopped a path and trampled down the debris that cluttered it. Straight as an arrow flies, I proceeded, straight to the dwelling beyond.

I seemed to catch glimpses of the same logs I had encountered yesterday. There was the same stinking bog, the same vines and gnarled creepers. And it took me the same weary hours to push my way through.

As I neared the center of the jungle I heard my echo again, resounding far ahead of me. It grew louder as I proceeded, until it seemed to be pounding not twenty feet ahead of me. But it was so dark that I could scarcely see my hand before my face. I went on blindly, slashing and cutting like a man gone mad. Then I stopped and stared ahead.

There was a clearing in the trees, for a ray of sunlight poured down from above. It was the same clearing which I had found yesterday, a grassy hillock in the earth. I strove forward and walked swiftly to its summit. It stood there like a jewel set in the very center of the island. The very center! How uncannily I sensed it! There was nothing but trees on every side, and the cloudless patch of sky above.

I dared not to linger long, for I must reach the castle and return before sundown. I looked behind me and examined my position. Surely I could not miss my objective if I went straight ahead!

I took three steps from the edge of the knoll, then whirled around. It was dark again, and I could see no light save the filtered sunlight from above. But distinctly I had heard it; the sound of my footsteps in the underbrush behind me!

The echo again, I told myself, but I pushed my way ahead as if the Moslem himself were at my heels. For another hour I slashed through the forest. I seemed to climb the same trees which I had climbed just a moment before. I smelled the same swollen fungi. Once my outstretched hands touched an arrow stuck in a tree. I jerked it out and peered closely. It was old and rusty-headed, and was aimed in the direction in which I moved.

I grew more amazed as I proceeded. A sort of path was hacked through this side of the forest—a crude trail that someone had recently cut through. It was easier to move; yet I moved with caution. Who had carved this trail? Who?—and when?

At last I reached the opening of the marsh. I ran ahead breathlessly, across a soft bog and up the embankment of the castle. The sunlight streamed into my eyes, and for a moment I was blinded. But as my eyes narrowed for this light, I could see the place standing like a solid wall before me.

The door of the castle was hanging open, like the mouth of some animal compelling me to enter. It was in dread silence. The tower rose incumbently above my head. Every nook and cranny seemed the same as in Camelot—the narrow windows, the creaking gibbet chains hanging from its walls.

I went swiftly up the steps and moved inside. My eyes were blurred by what I saw. I ran up the stairway to the room beside the balcony. I stopped in sheer

horror; for this was my room—and this was Camelot.

ONCE again, before nightfall, I followed that eery trail back through the marshland. As I neared the center I heard that echo sounding before me—as of someone drawing nearer—someone not quite myself. When I reached the grassy hillock the sounds ceased, and when I went down the other side, they came again from behind me, growing softer.

I ran swiftly through the trees over a trail well trampled down. Breathlessly I reached the clearing, and then I stood sickened by what I saw: Camelot, shadowed in the dusk before me.

I raced through the door and to my room. I climbed the tower and saw Farquhar silent in his coffin. I came down again and dropped sobbing on my bed.

It was almost six o'clock before I felt the strength to arouse myself. I lighted a lantern and carried it to the window.

The darkness had descended swiftly, so that the castle was scarcely visible. I could see the tower and the balcony. A yellow fog hung over them, like a phantom seeking to hide them from my view. A fog like a dust storm—a whirlwind of mist and sand. But distinctly I saw a lighted lantern shining from the window beside the balcony.

Farquhar came down a few minutes later, none the more refreshed for his long sleep. He greeted me, then went directly to the balcony. He stared long and intently at the castle until he saw the black figure appear on the balcony; then he notched an arrow and drew it to his shoulder.

I stood at the balcony door, unnoticed and unminded. With aching dread I saw him fire the arrow into the darkness, and saw the other archer fire one back at the same instant. How long I stood watching these reflected marksmen, I cannot recall, but it seemed like many hours. Finally my horror overcame me, and I cried out in anguish. I ran to his side and grabbed his arm.

"In the name of God," I cried, "*do you know whom you are fighting?*"

Scarcely had the shaft shot from his bow, when he turned to me. In a voice as low as a whisper, he said, "I shall never know."

And then it happened.

The last word was still on his lips when he jerked upright. I saw the sudden wincing of the muscles in his face; then I saw his chest. It was pierced through and through by an arrow—directly into and through his heart, so that its head was sticking through his back.

Farquhar raised himself to his toes, one hand grasped the arrow where it entered his chest. I saw the light of fire in his eyes, and heard strange foreign words fall from his dark lips. I heard words which were meant for no ears on earth; then I saw Farquhar shake and crash face-downward on the floor.

He had fallen on top of his bow, which cracked beneath him. The bloodless tip of the arrow stuck upright from his spine—up more than fifteen inches where it had been pounded through him when he fell!

I stood above him, cold with dread. Even as I watched, his body seemed to shrink. That long body of sleek muscle fell away swiftly, and the cloak drooped over him as if it hung upon only the branches of his former being. A sort of dust rose from beneath it, evil-smelling and ancient, like the dust of fallen pylons. A sedimental clay was on the floor.

I left the castle as fast as my legs would carry me, and for two hours I pounded my way back through the jungle. Exhausted and numbed I reached

the far side and saw the jagged mass of the castle rising before me. There was a lantern shining from the window beside the balcony, but there were no sounds. I raced swiftly to the open door and up the steps. At the balcony door I stopped.

I saw a sheaf of arrows, and a black-caped figure lying on the floor. From beneath the figure I saw the shattered ends of a longbow, held together by only a string. I ran forward and jerked away the cape.

A rotting skeleton was lying there, with an arrow stuck between its ribs.

LAST DAY. (At sea) I am in stateroom A-3, the room which Farquhar occupied on the voyage to Durance Island. It is cold in here, and I have but to move a finger to feel his presence here about me. It is well into the night, it is dreamy, and music drifts from the rooms below, and I can hear people on the promenade laughing lightly among themselves.

And I can hear other sounds—the churning of the propellers as they push the *Celtic* farther and farther away. But how far can the mightiest propellers push me from this island?

I must sit here and write the last words.

Yes, I have buried William Farquhar. How or why? With whose strength of body and soul, I cannot say. Surely not my own! I buried him in the grassy hillock in the center of the island, with an arrow for his tombstone.

On that night I wandered back and forth along my path like an automaton drawn and driven by unseen forces. From Camelot I carried Farquhar's bones to the hillock and laid them down. I then went — how unutterably mad! — back through the jungle to the other castle, and found only his cape and broken bow . . . and that dust which wafted on the floor. His bones were gone—gone as I had taken them but an hour before.

From Camelot to Camelot I traveled that night, and from balcony to balcony searching for the bones of the other. But there were only Farquhar's bones, which I had laid on the knoll. There was only Camelot Castle, which I went running out of—only to run back into it.

The night is growing younger, and the dawn of tomorrow breaks on the horizon. Tomorrow we shall be far from this place, and soon I shall be home again—home in that little room where Farquhar first came to me less than two weeks ago.

But can I ever cease to wonder? Can I ever cease to take my soul back to Durance Island, and let it dwell in futility between those ancient places? Shall I ever be able to forget just one word of the Moslem priest? I think not; I think the archer's words will haunt me all the days of my life. Over and over I have pondered on these things; I have weighed one castle against the other, one archer against his foe. My task is a hopeless one, and I had best look back upon this voyage with clouded eyes.

For I can never cease but wonder why there are not two graves, instead of one, to mark the final resting-place of William Farquhar.

"The awful pulsating shape of evil pounced upon the rigidly staring alchemist."

# The Elixir of Death

By EANDO BINDER

*The story of an unscrupulous alchemist whose sins brought down upon him a weird and terrible doom*

MASTER ICHNOR surveyed his philtres and potions, all neatly arranged on broad wooden shelves, with rapturous pride. Brewed of rare materials and subtle compounds, distilled in an atmosphere of sorceric incantation, and delicately perfumed with myrrh and sandalwood and coriander, they possessed a potency priced highly in the commerce of life. His eyes strayed from one to the other—cuprous green, coral pink, crystal amber, xanthic yellow,

they were of all colors and all uses. Some were love-charms, others medicines to cure ailments; again, there were liquids to quell riotous emotions, solutions to inflame passions, concoctions that could wreak havoc or do good, as they were used.

Necromancer and alchemist, Master Ichnor was famed in all Normandy as a powerful doctor-magician. His laboratory-wrought products were much in demand, and sold for princely amounts. Not only did he combine a rare chemical skill with a hoary lore of age-old secrets, but he infused his lotions and salves and fluids with a great sorcery. His familiar, reposing in the abhorrent hulk of a fat sleepy toad always perched on his writing-table, was a clever and obedient spirit, and his many conjurations gave him contact with the most remote and powerful nether entities.

His laboratory—part of an ancient cave of unknown origin—was replete with alchemical apparatus and the more gruesome paraphernalia of a sorcerer. Alembics, athanors, cucurbits, pelicans, furnaces and stills stood intermingled in a semi-confusion with rhombuses, glaring skulls, censers, idol-images, shelves of bleached bones, and jars of rare items such as frog's eyes, wolves' teeth, and pigeon's blood, for his sundry concoctions. Even the living-quarters—several small rooms to the rear of the laboratory—were cluttered with curious painted stones and sticks, half-rotted totem poles, finely inscribed pentacles, and a veritable library of yellowed parchments and books.

But Master Ichnor frowned as his eyes came at last to an empty space among the phials and bottles. At one time he had had the place taken up with a flask holding a sparkling golden fluid, a solution able to prolong human life beyond its normal span. This elixir—it approached the ancient idea of the universal panacea—had been able to rejuvenate the old, stir the young to wild happiness, and arouse in any partaker a pure joy of living, no matter how irksome his life. A mere cupful—it had sold for a small ransom in tiny portions. But the space for the bottle remained empty, for Master Ichnor had been unable to procure a second time one of its priceless ingredients.

Intent upon his examination of the many glass containers and their refined contents, Master Ichnor failed to notice that his young assistant, pumping the bellows, was wrapped in thought, unmindful of his charge. The hot coals beneath one copper bulb of a huge pelican flared as though fanned by a hell-breath, and caused the retort's contents to begin a violent boiling. Not long could the fragile upper chamber of glass stand the terrific pressure, and suddenly it burst, spattering the scalding liquid in a fine spray for many feet.

STAGGERING from the thunderous concussion Master Ichnor fell against the shelves he had been regarding, knocking to the rock floor several expensive philtres. He whirled in a rage, glaring at the young man on the floor, who had been thrown there by the force of the explosion.

"Margo, dolt! What have you done?"

"Master, I——"

"Blithering idiot! You have ruined what I so laboriously prepared for final distillation. And these——"

Looking from the shattered pelican to the pools of liquid at his feet, the alchemist flew into a purple wrath. Margo, frantic and speechless in fear, cowered into the corner in a tremble.

"Spawn of Beelzebub, you are no better than my last assistant! It was his failing to let the fires die; you, in turn, fan them to a fury. I am cursed with nitwits

for helpers. They will drive me to an early grave with their carelessness."

"Master, forgive me! I——"

For answer the alchemist reached a bony hand to a cupboard of chemicals, taking from it a bottle of vitriolic liquid. In his fury at the ruination of three days' work, it was his purpose to pour the burning acid over the young man's face and disfigure him for life.

There was a knock at the outer door of the cave-laboratory.

Already prepared to throw the corrosive fluid upon his cringing assistant, Master Ichnor hesitated. Anger and surprize fought for supremacy within him. What visitor could this be, after midnight? To the sobbing relief of the young helper, the alchemist finally replaced the bottle of acid.

"I will punish you later, Margo. At present, go open the door. But first be sure it is a lone visitor; I am not to be waylaid by thieves or evil-doers in my own laboratory. Then see also that you clear up the mess you made in your wooden-headedness."

With thankful alacrity the assistant, a mere boy, ran to the far end of the long, low rock chamber. Stooping low he traversed a short corridor like a tunnel and came before a weighty oaken door. Cautiously peering out from a tiny sliding panel, and assured that there was but one person outside, he shoved aside the heavy iron cross-beam.

Shaking snow from his cloak, a tall muffled figure strode in from the winter's bitterness outside, dressed in heavy woolen clothing, and with a thick scarf about his face so that only his eyes were visible.

"Your master is in, lad?"

"Yes, sire. You will follow me."

The stranger followed silently, straightening up from the tunnel hallway to face Master Ichnor. The latter's keen dark eyes darted over his person searchingly; he had many enemies and it was not wise to be careless.

The newcomer bowed. "Master Ichnor, I believe?"

The alchemist bowed slightly in return. "At your service, sir," he said, but his voice held a note of inquiry.

"Perhaps I will be at *your* service," responded the stranger in a muffled voice through his tightly wrapped scarf.

The alchemist stared uncomprehending. Then he motioned for the visitor to step forward, pointing to a chair opposite his own across the writing-table.

As the stranger strode forward, Master Ichnor watched him closely. The crude table was in one corner of the laboratory, some twenty feet from the chamber's sole means of entrance and egress. During the interval when Margo had admitted the stranger into the rock-bound laboratory, the alchemist had been engaged in a curious rite. Muttering a strange invocation, he had traced with a long thin wand of ivory, tipped with amber-imbedded dragon scales, a straight line between the doorway and table.

It was an invisible thread of magical potency, having the power to reveal unvoiced thoughts of hate. Should the person crossing it bear malice to the alchemist, it would cause him to shudder and tremble and thus reveal evil intent; and should the hatred be great, it would cast the bearer to the floor in agony. This precaution against bodily harm Master Ichnor rigidly applied to all and sundry of the many people who came to visit him for one purpose or another.

The alchemist watched hawk-like as the newcomer crossed the necromantic hate-line. Without hesitation, apparently unaffected, the visitor passed over and

calmly seated himself in the proffered chair. Master Ichnor was satisfied. Whatever the man wanted, it could be nothing harmful to the well-being of the laboratory's master. The huge ugly toad not far from the stranger's elbow blinked solemnly at him, then resumed its almost continuous sleep.

"Now, good sir," said the alchemist, "if you will remove that stifling scarf, and give me your name, we shall speak as friends."

The stranger shook his head. "My scarf remains, Master Ichnor. I have made a vow never to show my face in this region. Necessity brings me here to seek your presence, but I cannot break the vow, sworn in the name of certain gods whom I revere."

The alchemist frowned in displeasure, then shrugged.

"By name you can know me, as Lordeaux."

"Then, Lordeaux, what is your pleasure in my poor rock hovel?" queried Master Ichnor, suspecting the visitor to be some wealthy nobleman unwilling to reveal his identity. Oftentimes before, such personages had come to him for a purpose more nefarious and sinister than they would care to admit.

"Do you seek a charm to call down the moon for unrequited love? Has your wife become faithless? Is there some person you would bring to harm in subtle ways? Do you wish to increase sharpness of mind, strength of limb, serenity of spirit? Do you seek fame, fortune, power, knowledge? All these things I can accomplish for you with my alembic-wrought sublimations and distillations. Of course, at a price, for we must all gain a livelihood."

"Nay, none of those," answered the muffled stranger. "I have come instead for an elixir which can take the stiffness of oncoming age from my limbs, and the scourge of senility from my many years. I would be young again. Have you such an—elixir of life?"

"An elixir of life! But my good Lordeaux——"

"I will pay you handsomely," interrupted the stranger eagerly. "Give me a phialful, even a few drops, enough to bring the flush of youth for a day, and I will pour gold in your lap!"

Master Ichnor's gimlet eyes flashed avariciously, and he cursed inwardly at the empty space his eyes involuntarily searched out on his shelves.

"You do not have it!" said the stranger, reading the alchemist's disappointment. "Ah, then I must swallow hope, for no lesser physician in this land could have it."

"One of the ingredients," explained Master Ichnor dispiritedly, "is a material so rare and priceless that it would beggar a king to procure it. It can be found only in a far-distant, barbaric land, infested with dragons and cruel people. I had some once, from the hands of a man whom the gods had protected in a hazardous journey in its quest. But since then none has dared the task, though I offered a casket of precious stones for its delivery to me."

The stranger's body seemed to convulse suddenly in some cloaked emotion. "Would you offer that same chest of jewels now, were I to show you a goodly quantity of that rare ingredient for the elixir of life?"

Master Ichnor's chair scraped on the rock as he started violently. "What sport of yours is this, Lordeaux? Can you mean——"

"The ingredient," continued the stranger, "is a rectification of the leaves of a mandrake-like flower which grows in an easterly land nigh the shores of the sea called Lethe-mare. Between this

land and that lie the Hunnish hordes, unconquerable nomads whose greatest pleasure is the spilling of blood. The shores of Lethe-mare itself are dank jungle, infested with violent dragons, gargoyles, and nameless creatures, and the waters of the sea writhe in the contortions of sea serpents and ancient water demons of mountainous bulk.

"The mandrake-plant which takes root in the heart of this slithering chaos is a delicate, sun-loving vegetation, bearing spine-edged leaves of vivid green, and flowers whose broad petals shine with uncanny crimson light, even at night, and exude a maddeningly exquisite aroma. If the petals are gathered in the light of the full moon, severed from the stem with a silver knife consecrated to Belial, sponsor of the Black Arts, while in full bloom, they are the crude compound from which the elixir of life may be distilled.

"By this knowledge I have, you may judge that I speak not idly about this matter."

Master Ichnor's lips moved soundlessly in amazement. This man knew things that were hushed secrets in necromantic circles. Then he found his tongue. "Give me the leaves, a mere dozen of them, and you shall have the chest of jewels."

The stranger reached with mittened hand inside his cloak and brought to light a packet no bigger than his palm, wrapped carefully in doeskin and tied with rawhide thongs. The alchemist reached out a trembling hand.

"The jewels," reminded Lordeaux, holding the packet close.

Master Ichnor remained with hand outstretched, and there grew in his eyes an evil glint. It was worth the price, worth ten times the price, but why pay at all?

The stranger's voice, harsh, broke the silence: "There await me outside—not a hundred feet away behind a big rock so that your assistant did not see them when he let me in—three armed men. If they see me not come out of this place in an hour——"

Master Ichnor waved an ingratiating hand. "The jewels, of course!"

He left the presence of Lordeaux and disappeared in the chambers at the outer end of the laboratory. The stranger sighed audibly through his scarf, watched the boy Margo industriously scrubbing chemical stains from the floor, and then turned ill at ease toward the great toad perched beside an inkwell. For the creature was gazing at him solemnly, steadily, with one of its bulging eyes, the other enigmatically closed.

Master Ichnor returned not a minute later and set on the table a small iron-bound casket of seasoned teakwood. Its opening with a silver key let forth a blaze of sparkling iridescence, as though light had somehow been imprisoned in the crystalline mass within.

The stranger gasped at the beauty and wealth before his eyes. He looked up strangely; robbery and murder had been done for far less. Yet despite the knowledge of three armed men outside, the alchemist had no fear of robbery at the hands of the visitor, for the hate-line would have revealed such dishonest intentions from the first.

The alchemist closed the casket and shoved it across the table to the other man, taking the packet in return. As Lordeaux made as if to rise and leave with his treasure, Master Ichnor gestured for him to remain seated.

"We must consummate the deal in writing, good sir. And before that, although I do not doubt your honest intentions, I must test the packet's contents."

"Agreed," responded the stranger without hesitation.

"Margo!" cried the alchemist, turning to his assistant. "Set up the golden crucible on a low tripod, and get me a china-

stone mortar and pestle. Then set up the Balneum Mariæ and apply yourself to the bellows. Sharply now; we must not keep the gentleman overlong."

THE young assistant jumped to obey, and Master Ichnor opened the packet reverently, nervous in excitement. The folds of doeskin and underlying dampened cloths parted to reveal a few dozen compressed flower petals of searing crimson color. One of these the alchemist ground gently in the mortar till it was a blood-like paste.

The stranger watched in apparent indifference. Now and then he looked at the monstrous toad sitting motionless at the end of the table; the creature's eyes, both now open in a gruesome unblinking stare, were glued on his as though it sought to read his mind. Lordeaux stirred in his chair and turned away in irritation.

Having mixed the ruddy paste with several colored liquids and filtered it through fine gravel, Master Ichnor placed the resultant fluid in one vessel of the steam distillery. It was now of an orange hue, and its vapor, a brilliant golden in color, circled gently in the long-necked retort as Margo diligently pumped the bellows, fanning the flames beneath the huge Balneum Mariæ.

The alchemist caught the distillate in a high narrow flask, no more than a thimbleful in all. He held it up to the lamplight gloatingly. In color it was perfect. He tested its aroma to be further reassured by its unmistakable pleasantness.

"The final test," said Master Ichnor for the enlightenment of the stranger, "will be to incinerate it with vitriol in a golden crucible. If it has the true strength and quality of the elixir, its delicious odor will not be destroyed, but will permeate this entire chamber. It will even bring us pleasant thoughts, and will stir the fire of youth momentarily in our veins."

The stranger, his face still carefully swathed, leaned forward in interest. Master Ichnor set the golden crucible and its corrosive charge of acid over an alcohol flame, pouring in the golden yellow liquid when the oily vitriol had begun to steam slightly. As though in nervousness, the stranger fumbled with his cloak. The alchemist did not notice that he retrieved from it a small sprig of cedary needles, which he raised surreptitiously to his face.

Master Ichnor stared at the now bubbling mixture rapturously, content that he would soon be able to fill that empty space in his shelves and once more accumulate wealth which it was his failing to distill away in less remunerative pursuits, seeking not riches but an arcanum of inestimable power and knowledge. It was every alchemist's dream to discover the ultimate essence, the Stone of Wisdom, possession of which would bring god-like power and wisdom.

The bubbling solution, at first clear amber in color, began to turn murky, darkening with streaks of charred blackness. Master Ichnor frowned at this and peered closer. The stranger, too, seemed to be vastly alert. And the fat body of the toad near him began to twitch as though needles were pricking its skin.

Scowling in apprehension, the alchemist sniffed continuously above the tumultuous liquid in the golden crucible, waiting for its delicate aroma to arise that would assure him he had the right substance. Suddenly the frothing mixture became turbulent and shot from its surface a steamy cloud of black vapor whose hideous stench quickly saturated every nook of the laboratory.

Master Ichnor snatched away the alcohol flame in great alarm. His nostrils pinched involuntarily at the odor, and his throat became raw, for he had unwit-

tingly inhaled a great breath of the evil black steam.

"What deviltry is this?" he shouted, whirling upon the stranger.

Even as he spoke he recoiled in surprize, for the stranger was now erect and the scarf had fallen away from his face. Before his nostrils he held the sprig of evergreen, breathing in its spicy sharpness. The face revealed was thin and drawn, saturnine in the flickering lamplight, and most of the skin was covered by a repulsive purple blotching, the result of burning.

"TOUSSAINT!" screamed Master Ichnor. "It is you!"

"Yes, it is I," returned the other with an evil grin. "Your former assistant, who one day inadvertently fell asleep at the bellows, for which misdemeanor you threw vitriol at my face, scarring me for life."

"Toussaint, you devil! What have you done to me?" cried the alchemist, for it seemed the sooty vapor he had absorbed was burning out his vitals. "My lungs burn—my heart——"

A cacchination of vengeful laughter rang through the laboratory. "You are doomed, Master Ichnor, and by the hand of one who vowed and planned for ten years a suitable vengeance. I learned much as your assistant, master, and today I stand your equal, if not your better, as alchemist. And as necromancer I stand above you; did I not pass your soul-searching hate-line and refrain from showing the mighty hatred I bear you? I shall replace you, Master Ichnor, take your laboratory and your treasure; the two of us cannot live in the same land."

"Replace me!" gurgled the alchemist, almost strangling as his lungs retched violently. "You must kill me first. Look, I wave my wand; you are paralyzed! Break that spell with your boasted magic! In another minute I shall weave a dread enchantment and drive your black soul to the lowermost nadir."

Toussaint had suddenly frozen, unable to move hand or foot. The sprig, which Master Ichnor failed to take account of, remained before his nose.

"You have me there, Master Ichnor," said the former assistant with effort. "I cannot reach my wand to break this paralysis. But gloat in despair, for the black vapor you have inhaled will accomplish for me my freedom. Know, great master, that it is the Breath of Asmodeus, avenger of evil, conjured into those crimson petals which seemed so like the mandrakes of Lethe-mare, by my most skilful art. The vitriol released that horrific black breath from hidden hells; it is now in your lungs, eating into your vitals. It will dissolve your soul and extract from it every evil thing you have ever thought or done. Your sins will become an entity, an evil genie, and carry you off to some awful hell, body and soul!"

Master Ichnor coughed wretchedly. He raised his wand in the direction of the toad on the table, muttering a word of adjuration. The ugly creature, in response, strained to release the familiar within its bloated bulk, but instead a sudden violent tremor threw it on its back, lifeless.

Toussaint laughed. "Your servant-genie has deserted you."

Master Ichnor's eyes went dim at this ominous sign of the presence of alien demon powers. "You are right; I can feel that hideous disintegration of my very soul! So be it, since there is no escape, but I console myself that you will go with me to whatever vile hell awaits me, for your evil can be no less than mine."

"But I won't," grinned Toussaint triumphantly. "I have before my nose a sprig of evergreen. Beyond it the black

vapor cannot pass. I will not go with you, nor will Margo there, for in his extreme youth lies his salvation; his life has not yet been sated with evil as yours and mine. You go alone!"

The alchemist stiffened suddenly, and with a convulsive shudder cast from his lungs the black vapor in one huge cloud, steamy with his breath. But there was something more in its tenuousness, a peculiar gray mist that was neither breath nor vapor. The clammy, repulsive cloud, quivering as though alive, did not disperse, but instead gathered above the golden crucible from which streamers of black yet emerged, and seemed to absorb the foul exudate.

Then the globe of vapor became almost opaque and expanded until it stretched from floor to ceiling. In its abhorrently quivering substance could be seen a nameless writhing of tiny whorls of evil blackness. It was a personification of the essence of evil that had reposed in the alchemist's soul. It took various shapes in frightful rapidity, and in the stark eyes of Master Ichnor it was a reflection of every sin, small and large, of his past life.

Toussaint, grinning sardonically all the while, suddenly went ashen in fear, and, released of the paralytic spell, turned away from the blasphemy before his eyes. Holding the evergreen sprig frantically to his nose, he stumbled blindly toward the doorway and ran from the abomination which he had brought about for his revenge.

There were no eyes to see the final obscene event, for little Margo had fainted dead away from fright. The awful pulsating shape of evil, bloated with the black Breath of Asmodeus, pounced upon the rigidly staring alchemist, and enveloped him in a cloak of utter evil. Some strange transformation took place and with a clap of thunder that shattered every glass vessel in the laboratory, the hideous vision disappeared.

And Master Ichnor vanished with it.

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# The Werewolf Snarls

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

*A brief story, with a breath of icy horror in it*

"I WANT you to meet Mr. Craw," prattled Lola Wurther to me. "He claims to be a werewolf."

And she turned—fluttery hands, fluttery white shoulders, fluttery blond curls, fluttery skirts of green silk—to lose herself in the crowd of noisy guests at the bar. Mr. Craw and I took two or three steps together, as though we both sought quiet.

"Sit down," I suggested, and we dropped upon a divan in the half-gloom behind Lola Wurther's big grand piano. Then we looked at each other.

He was a huge, high-shouldered creature in rather seedy dress clothes, with

coarse black hair grown low on his forehead and around his flat-lying, pointed ears. His long anvil of a chin lay snugly between the wings of his collar, his long poniard of a nose lay upon his chin, and his mouth caught between was as tight and lipless as a slit in leather. The pallor of his face accentuated the wet-licorice black of his eyes. He made me feel my own physical frailty as a little, rheumatic old man half his volume.

"Well," he invited huskily, "do I look it?"

"You mean like a werewolf?" I suggested, and waited smiling for the witty retort. But he shook his head.

"It happens to be quite true," he assured me with the absolute solemnity of the very drunken or the very insane.

I jumped at that, although I was used to meeting bizarre figures in the Wurther parlor. Not knowing what to say, I kept my own nervous mouth shut. After a musing moment, Craw went on.

"I came here tonight looking for help in my desperate problem. Wurther and his wife are supposed to be experts in occultism."

"Mr. Craw," I could not help saying, "the Wurthers are unmitigated fakes."

"I was thinking that," he nodded glumly. "Apparently their only reason for letting me come was to make sport for their friends." A pause, awkward for me at least. "Well, then, shall I tell you?"

"Please do," I urged, feeling strangely foolish.

Craw hunched his shoulders, sank his head, and let his clasped hands slide down, down between his knees until the thick knuckles almost rested on the floor. There was something animal-like in the attitude: his body and limbs seemed measured and joined according to an abnormal pattern. His licorice eyes sought mine, and at the moment they did not look exactly human, either. Too much gloomy iris for one thing, and too little rim of white for another. In their depths lurked a green light, feeble but hard.

"It began," said Craw, "when I experimented with the witch-ointments."

"Witch-ointments?"

"Yes. Supposed to be rubbed on for changes into animal forms—made and used by magicians according to Satanic formulas. They sound fantastic, I know, but I was a medical student, working on a paper about pre-Renaissance medicine. There were several recipes."

"Recipes?" I repeated. "Not really?"

"Yes, a dozen at least. The 1896 bulletin of Johns Hopkins Hospital printed one, in an article by Doctor Robert Fletcher. Several other modern scientists have offered others, wholly or in part. And let me tell you that there's more sound pharmacy in them than you'd think."

I thought, indeed hoped, that he was merely spoofing. But there was no bantering smile upon his thin lips, and his eyes looked drawn and haggard about the corners.

"Belladonna, for instance," he amplified. "It's a common ingredient. Makes you see visions, as you probably know. And monkshood, full of deadly aconitine. Henbane, that Shakespeare called 'the insane root'; and hemlock. These and other things, made into a salve with the fat of an unbaptized child——"

"I say," I broke in again, not very politely, "you don't ask me to believe that you——"

"But I did." Again that melancholy nod of assurance. "There was a baby's body fetched to the dissecting-room at school." He paused and his eyes nar-

rowed, as though to gaze down a fearsome groove into the past. "Well, I mixed the stuff up. For a lark." His mouth slashed open in a rueful grin, revealing oversize, uneven teeth.

"You rubbed it on?" I prompted. Once more he nodded, and I pursued: "What happened?"

"Nothing." Craw sat up straight again and spoke more clearly. "I don't know what I expected to happen, or if in truth I expected anything. But I do remember feeling like a fool, and an unclean fool to boot. I started to clean the grease off, but it had absorbed into me somehow, like a vanishing cosmetic."

He shuddered slightly, briefly.

"As I say, nothing happened all that day, or that night, or the next day. But the next night," and his voice dropped suddenly to a breathy mutter, "was the night of the full moon."

On the instant I remembered a host of stories with which my childhood nurse had regaled me, stories about the full moon and its effect on the human soul and fate. Few of them had been pleasant. Craw was plunging ahead:

"Moonlight meant romance to me then, and nothing more. Collegian-like, I went on a riverside walk with a girl—a Liberal Arts sophomore. There was a sort of sandy jut out into the water, and we loitered there. Something I said made her laugh, with her face turned up to me in the moonlight. Then she stopped laughing, and her mouth twisted like a snake when you step on it."

"Whatever for?" I almost gasped.

"Her eyes—on my face—were frightened."

CRAW leaned suddenly toward me. I caught, or fancied I caught, a whiff of musky odor as from an animal cage. In spite of myself I slid back and away from him on the cushions. I had just remembered that there was a full moon tonight.

Again Craw's tense voice: "She tried to scream and, frightened myself, I grasped her by the shoulder to calm her. When I touched her flesh, a new mood suddenly took possession of me. Of its own will my hand switched to her throat. Shaking her, I snarled at her to be silent. And she sagged down, in a faint. My thoughts and senses churned all up, as if in a new feeling of exultation at conquest. Then——"

He spread his great, spatulate fingers.

"In the morning they found her gnawed body. In the afternoon, while I was still telling myself that it was a dream, the police came to my dormitory. They found blood on my clothing and under my nails."

"You were *that* Craw!" I exclaimed.

His smile was bitter and tight-lipped this time. "Oh, so you read the papers? 'Undergraduate beast-man' the headlines called me, and 'medico monster'. What I told the police—the solemn truth—was too much for them to believe. They called in alienists. So I was sent to the asylum, not to the electric chair."

"Look here," I ventured, in a voice that threatened to close up in my throat with every word, "I think you'd better talk about something else. You shouldn't have let yourself talk about this business in the first place."

But he shook his head so emphatically that the coarse locks stirred at his narrow temples. I'm not crazy, old chap. You see, just two weeks ago I was officially certified normal." He sniffed. "How could they know the frenzy, the throttling rage and the blood-thirst, that closed over me like water in my locked room—

every month, on the night when the moon was full?"

His clenched hands lifted. I saw his nails, pointed and thick and opaque, like pieces of mussel-shell.

"I used to howl and shriek, so that the attendants came to pacify me. They got bitten for their pains; so there were barred cells and straitjackets. It was two years before a cunning sneaked in with the moon-madness, a cunning that whispered I must suffer in silence if ever I wanted to go free."

"And you were silent?"

"I was. At length the doctors had me up for another examination. They hammered at my knees for reflexes, asked a bunch of clever questions, and finally discharged me as cured." Once again a pause. "But I wasn't cured, of course."

"Surely," I mouthed in the most stupid fashion imaginable, "surely you wanted to be cured."

"Of course." Craw snapped his big teeth together after the two words, as though they needed emphasis. "So I turned to the Wurthers, as I said at the beginning. I'd heard somewhere that they knew devil and all about occultism and the night-side of the soul. A week ago I hunted James Wurther out at his club and told him the whole cursed business."

"Told him what you've just told me?"

"Exactly. And he heard me out, then said nothing for a full five minutes. Finally he smiled and said, 'I'll help you. On the night of the full moon I'll be entertaining. Come to my place then, and we'll make everything all right.' "

He leaned against the cushions, as if his story was done. I wriggled nervously, wondering whether he was very clever, even cleverer than most of the bizarre Wurther guests, or whether he was dangerous. I weighed the chances of getting up and walking away without seeming too furtive. . . .

"Oh, there you are, Mr. Craw!" squealed Lola Wurther behind our shoulders. "Some new people have come—girls—and they're dying to meet——"

She swooped down upon him and bore him away toward three young women with vapid, painted smiles.

It was my chance to leave, and I took it. I crossed the room to the chairs where the hats and coats were piled. Glancing back, I saw Craw yet again, from behind.

His shoulders seemed strangely narrow, and humped in a fashion somehow hyena-like. His hair—perhaps it was not carefully combed at the back of his low skull—was shaggy. A first I had thought his ears flat, but I saw now that they inclined forward, as though involuntarily pricked up.

"He claims to be a werewolf," Lola Wurther was finishing her introduction, and a tinkle of laughter ascended all around.

I got my things and left without being noticed.

THAT was last night. Before me lies the morning paper, with an arresting headline:

4 TORN CORPSES
FOUND IN PARLOR

———

Police Baffled Over Murder
of James Wurther and
Guests

———

SEEK "BEAST MAN"

I have not yet forced myself to read the rest.

# Eric Martin's Nemesis

By JAY WILMER BENJAMIN

*Who—or what—was the shape that pursued Eric Martin as he fled from the prison after murdering the guard in cold blood?*

ERIC MARTIN fingered the sharp knife he had fashioned from a piece of heavy tin broken from the dangling spout by the jail's upper window and planned for the time when he would use it to gain his freedom.

He didn't intend to spend the next ten years of his life in the state penitentiary. He had stolen the money, of course—who wouldn't have if given the chance? The county prosecutor had spoken of him as weak-willed, a coward who had taken advantage of his position in the bank to steal the savings of widows and orphans. The bonding company had made good, hadn't it? Anyway, he had meant to pay it back, just as soon as he doubled or trebled it on the races. He could have, too. But they hadn't given him a chance. And now he faced ten long years in the penitentiary.

He rubbed his thumb against the knife, under his shirt, and wet his lips nervously. Not while he had his strength, he wouldn't. . . .

It seemed to Martin that things were breaking just right for him. The usual crowd of Kingstown's Saturday drunk-and-disorderly prisoners had been released. Three negroes were in the back cage, a half-dozen white men were idling the time away in the front cage. Those two big rooms were where the common run of prisoners were kept. But he was in a solitary cell—just a small room with a wide-barred door—just off the top of the stairs, outside of the main rooms. As a prisoner booked for a trip to the state penitentiary the next morning, old Tom Brenner, the jailer, had felt it would be safer to have him there. Old Tom hadn't known about that broken spout just outside of his window. That was old Tom's tough luck.

Maybe Brenner had thought he would rather be alone. A great one for preaching sermons, Brenner was. Martin had known the jailer all his life. He drew his face into a scowl. Trying to tell him to be good, and let this be a lesson to him! Sunday School tripe! It wouldn't be any lesson to him—except to teach him to be more careful. He was going to be a big shot when he got out. . . .

It was almost time. Lights were out. Probably a majority of the other prisoners were seeking freedom in sleep. He had asked Brenner to bring him some ice-cream about eleven o'clock, and the jailer had promised to get it from the one café which kept open till midnight. Kingstown wasn't an all-night town. The rest would be easy, if he used his head—and the knife.

HE HEARD Brenner coming upstairs. The door to the inner room was closed. Not that it mattered, for there was a barred door inside of the wooden one. But it would be better, by far, to be unseen.

He held the crude, sharp piece of tin in his right hand, kept it out of sight inside his shirt. Brenner wheezed into view. He carried a cardboard container of ice-cream.

"Here it is, Eric," he said, and held it out before him.

"Bring it closer," demanded Martin.

Old Brenner complied. Martin stuck his left arm through the bars, suddenly grabbed Brenner by the neck. His right hand came up, holding the knife. He poised the sharp point against old Brenner's Adam's apple.

"Will you open up?" he demanded tensely.

Brenner clenched his teeth, shook his head carefully left and right.

Martin meant to hit him with the heavy end of the improvised weapon, to pound him into unconsciousness. But Brenner struggled, and all of Martin's rage boiled over. He struck swiftly, blindly. Red spouted from Brenner's severed jugular.

The jailer opened his mouth as if to scream, but no sound came. He sprawled to the floor. It seemed to Martin that everyone must hear him. But there was no noise from the inner room. The jailer lay there wide-eyed. A pool of crimson grew larger on the floor beside his body.

Brenner tugged at the body through the wide-apart bars of the door. He obtained the keys from Brenner's pocket, unlocked his cell, went into the passage.

The jail prisoners wore no uniforms, of course. In the darkness, it would be a simple matter for him to walk out and away. He stopped downstairs, took Brenner's gun from its holster slung over a chair in the dead man's cluttered living-room, pocketed a double handful of cartridges. Not that he expected to need them, but he had gone too far to take chances now.

Even as he worked, the horror of his position came to him. For the first time he realized that he had gone farther than he had planned, that he had killed a man in cold blood. If he were caught, that would not be a jail sentence. It would mean the gallows. . . .

He found a topcoat in the closet, together with a battered felt. He put on the coat, turned up the collar, pulled the hat low over his eyes. Martin peered cautiously through a window. He knew there should be no visitors to see Brenner at this hour, but he meant to take no unnecessary risks. He wanted to go it alone. The county prosecutor had been right, he realized. He *was* a coward. He shivered as he thought of Brenner lying dead upstairs, shook physically as he visualized the trap, his own body falling, falling — the neck breaking. . . . He forced the pictures from his mind. He must think of other things. Once away from town, out of the state, he could get clear all right. He walked quietly out of the door to freedom. . . .

It was when he turned the corner into the alley a block from the jail that he first had the feeling that he was being followed. He waited there in the darkness, not daring to run, his heart pounding madly in his breast, steeling himself to club his pursuer with the gun butt. His nerve wasn't as taut as it had been when he had used that improvised knife. The idea of clubbing someone didn't appeal to him. Suppose he missed!

But no one came along. In the half-light shining through the trees from the arc on the corner, he saw no one moving away from the jail. He decided it had been his imagination.

MARTIN skirted the one-block business section, going through a cross-alley. He came out by the creek near the railroad station. It occurred to him that they might use bloodhounds when they found Brenner's body in the morning. He entered the creek, waded about fifty yards up the shallow stream. At the footbridge which led across to the station, he

pulled himself up onto the wooden floor, crossed toward the railroad.

No one was on duty at the station. Probably a coal drag would be along soon. They ran all the time, especially at night.

Martin walked the ties toward the water tank. Occasionally, he tried to balance himself on a rail, with a vague idea that it might help throw off the hounds if they ever got that far, keep the officers from being sure where he had gone. Of course, in the morning word would go out everywhere to pick him up, but if he could catch a freight and be in the city by that time it shouldn't be impossible to lose himself. It had been done. . . .

Again he had that strange feeling that someone was following him. When he sat in the shadow of the water tank, he peered back over the route he had followed. The moon was riding low in the sky. No one was to be seen.

A whistle wailed in the distance, the rails began to hum. Soon the long, thick finger of light from a locomotive's single eye touched the side of the tank, sent him scurrying behind it.

The freight stopped for water. He had counted on that. When the empties started clicking past again, Martin swung himself up and over, climbed carefully into a car. He stayed there for a good five minutes, until the scattered lights of the county seat were lost around a bend, then found a more comfortable place under the slanting end, between two cars. He had seen hobos riding there. All he had to worry about now was the brakeman, and it was unlikely that a brakeman would come climbing over the empties on the night run.

Suddenly he was quite sure that there was someone near him. His heart seemed to miss a few beats, then to pound ahead with renewed fury. He tried to get hold of himself, fingered the gun in his topcoat pocket. But the feeling persisted. He told himself there was no reason for his belief. Nevertheless, he *knew* that someone had followed him from the jail.

He stood up cautiously, holding tightly to the rods on the car, bracing himself to keep from falling between the whirling wheels. No one was in sight, but the fear inside of him did not abate. It grew. His heart wouldn't behave. He felt smothered, and opened his collar for air.

He decided on action. He was a good thirty cars from the engine. Clutching the hand bars with grim resolve, he climbed over the unaccustomed surfaces of the car ends and interiors. As he made his way toward the front of the train, he continually stole glances back toward the distant caboose. Only on an occasional long straight-away could he discern the tiny point of light which marked the rear end of the freight.

They were traveling fast. Once he thought he saw a vague shape outlined against the sky, but he told himself it was a brake wheel, suddenly caught by his eyes just as the cars lurched around a curve and outlined it against a gray cloud. But he was not sure.

He put the space of eight cars between himself and his former position. And all the time that fear grew. The faster he tried to run away from his imaginary pursuer, the more frightened he became, and the more certain he was that a pursuer really existed.

He was safely braced in his new place when he saw it. It was the shadowy form of a man, and it sat on the end of the next car down from him. It had not been there when he passed. It *was* following him!

Martin ducked out of sight, peered over the car top. It sat there, motionless, looking at him.

He thought perhaps it was a hobo. Well, he had a gun. He wanted to travel

alone. Setting his jaws, he started back through the car. The man on the other end started back too. When he reached the place where the other had sat, he saw the figure perched quietly at the far end of the car. Again he started toward it. Again the figure retreated. He turned, came back. The figure followed. Like a shadow, it hounded him. He was afraid to relax, to sit down quietly out of sight. He pulled his gun, threatened to shoot. The man ignored his gestures, just sat there.

Martin was afraid to fire the gun. He didn't want to murder anyone else. Besides, he feared his shot might draw the train crew. No telling who might hear the sound.

He decided to leave the train at the first opportunity and go it alone, on foot. Whoever this fool was, whether it was some railroad detective or a crazy hobo, he wanted no part of the stranger. He could catch another freight.

His chance came when the freight slowed down just after passing Ranside. It was a long haul up the hill, and even a string of empties had to lose speed. Martin, in his inexperience, misjudged the speed of the train, landed running but fell flat on his face and rolled over and over down the cinder bank of the right of way. He lay there in a heap in the shadow until the train passed, and the clatter of the wheels became a low rumble in the distance.

The moon was high now. He stood up, brushed some of the cinders from his clothes, limped experimentally. He was not badly hurt; only scratched and bruised. He looked around, moved away from the railroad.

He was about a hundred feet from the embankment when he had that feeling again, stronger than ever. He turned swiftly. The half-familiar figure was coming down the bank, sliding along after him determinedly.

Martin ran then. He didn't stop to reason. He just found himself running. He glimpsed a road paralleling the right of way, and streaked for it as fast as his bruises would allow him to travel. He glanced back over his shoulder. Without sound, seemingly without effort, the figure followed after.

Martin reached the dusty road, turned right, ran on. The other followed his trail. He ran until he gasped for breath, stumbled a few steps more, fell to the ground exhausted. He was afraid to look back. He had completely forgotten Brenner's gun by now. He cowered there, waiting for he knew not what. He fought desperately to keep his reason, tried to conquer this fear which was driving him mad.

For what seemed an eternity, but must have been but seconds, he lay there in the dust of the road. Finally he jerked himself to his knees, turned to meet the figure. It sat in the road, about a hundred feet away.

Martin had the feeling that the thing was a nightmare. It couldn't be real. It must be something he was dreaming—it had to be. . . .

His elbow hit the hard object in his topcoat pocket. He drew the gun with a little sob of thanks, aimed at the man on the ground.

"Stand up!" he ordered. Nothing happened.

Martin himself stood up then. So did the other. Martin took a few steps toward his pursuer. The other walked away as he approached.

Suddenly Martin's taut nerves broke, and a red mist came over his eyes, and he was cursing and sobbing wildly—broken meaningless curses, directed at the figure which stood so quietly watching him.

He squeezed the trigger fast. A jet of

flame shot from the gun, and the crash echoed back from the embankment. The figure stood there unmoved.

Eric Martin fired five more bullets. Then, screaming like a maniac, he hurled the gun at the silent creature, ran again. He knew now what was pursuing him. He had known all along. But he hadn't wanted to admit it. It was old Tom Brenner, come back from the dead! He was being followed by a murdered man's ghost. . . .

The idea wasn't fantastic any longer. It was not just an idea. It was reality. He staggered, screaming and sobbing, up the road toward Ranside, looking for someone, anyone, who would take away that impossible figure that followed him so ominously, whose pursuit he could not shake off.

He found the night policeman. Rather, the night policeman found him, when that gentleman came out to see what drunk was disturbing the peace and quiet of the night.

"Take him away!" screamed Eric Martin, reeling blindly into the policeman's arms. "It's old Tom Brenner—I killed him! I killed him! Do you hear me—I killed him! There he is—there he is—take him away!"

The policeman looked down the road. "I see nobody," he said, jerking Martin by the coat collar to make him quiet. "You're crazy drunk!"

"He's there — right there!" insisted Martin, pointing a shaking finger at the figure which stood about a hundred feet away.

The policeman had heard of old Tom Brenner, Kingstown jailer. He was sure this fellow had a good case of the blind staggers. But he locked Martin in a cell for safe keeping until morning, and hurried to a long-distance telephone.

It was when Martin, tossed into a corner of the cell, heard the key turn in the lock and came dizzily to his feet that he saw the figure again. It was closer now—it was in the cell with him!

And then he really knew the truth. Then he recognized his pursuer. Tom Brenner, come back from the dead, would have been bad enough, beyond all sense, enough to drive him mad. But it wasn't Tom Brenner. It was Eric Martin. . . .

Eric Martin knew, then, that he had killed himself, that he had lost his soul. The other Eric Martin stood there, just looking at him. Its eyes were the saddest things he had ever seen. There was no fire in them—only an utter hopelessness. They had lost all hope in life and death, all belief in a here or a hereafter. Somehow, Eric Martin felt that this other self he had killed would haunt him always, here and in eternity.

AT FIRST he tried to grapple with it. He had a desperate notion that if he managed to lock the figure in his arms he could merge it into himself again, regain his soul. But when he approached the other Eric Martin, it moved away. He walked faster, chased it around the little cell. He could not catch up with it. He screamed and cursed, until the other inhabitants of the jail cursed him in turn, and finally he fell unconscious on the cell floor.

They found him there after the telephone call confirmed his babbling.

He was judged to be crazy beyond a reasonable doubt. A kind-hearted lawyer appointed by the judge sought to comfort him.

"They aren't going to hang you, Martin," he explained. "You're just going to be sent to the insane asylum, where you can be cared for and live quietly, alone——"

Alone! Eric Martin went berserk at that. He tried to tell them that he didn't

want to live, that he wasn't crazy, that the self he had murdered would stay with him always, would make his life a hell on earth, that he wanted to die. But he only gibbered meaninglessly in a shrill cracked voice, and tried to crash his head against the wall, so that they had to strap him in a straitjacket. And all the while the other Eric Martin stood silently beside him, looking at him with its hopeless eyes . . . stood as he knew it would stand through endless days and nights. . . .

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# The Seeds From Outside

By EDMOND HAMILTON

*A strange and curious weird-scientific fantasy about two beings that came to earth in a meteor*

STANDIFER found the seeds the morning after the meteor fell on the hill above his cottage. On that night he had been sitting in the scented darkness of his little garden when he had glimpsed the vertical flash of light and heard the whiz and crash of that falling visitor from outer space. And all that night he had lain awake, eager for morning and the chance to find and examine the meteor.

Standifer knew little of meteors, for he was not a scientist. He was a painter whose canvases hung in many impressive halls in great cities, and were appropriately admired and denounced and gabbled about by those who liked such things. Standifer had grown weary of such people and of their cities, and had come to this lonely little cottage in the hills to paint and dream.

For it was not cities or people that Standifer wished to paint, but the green growing life of earth that he loved so deeply. There was no growing thing in wood or field that he did not know. The slim white sycamores that whispered together along the streams, and the sturdy little sumacs that were like small, jovial plant-gnomes, and the innocent wild roses that bloomed and swiftly died in their shady cover—he had toiled to transfix and preserve their subtle beauty for ever in his oils and colors and cloths.

The spring had murmured by in a drifting dream as Standifer had lived and worked alone. And now suddenly into the hushed quiet of his green, blossoming world had rudely crashed this visitant from distant realms. It strangely stirred Standifer's imagination, so that through the night he lay wondering, and gazing up through his casement at the white stars from which the meteor had come.

It was hardly dawn, and a chill and drenching dew silvered the grass and

bent the poplar leaves, when Standifer excitedly climbed the hill in search of the meteor. The thing was not hard to find. It had smashed savagely into the spring-green woods, and had torn a great raw gouge out of the earth as it had crashed and shattered.

For the meteor had shattered into chunks of jagged, dark metal that lay all about that new, gaping hole. Those ragged lumps were still faintly warm to the touch, and Standifer went from one to another, turning them over and examining them with marveling curiosity. It was when he was about to leave the place, that he glimpsed amid this meteoric debris the little square tan case.

It lay half imbedded still in one of the jagged metal chunks. The case was no more than two inches square, and was made of some kind of stiff tan fiber that was very tough and apparently impervious to heat. It was quite evident that the case had been inside the heart of the shattered meteor, and that it was the product of intelligence.

Standifer was vastly excited. He dug the tiny case out of the meteoric fragment, and then tried to tear it open. But neither his fingers nor sharp stones could make any impression on the tough fiber. So he hurried back down to his cottage with the case clutched in his hand, his head suddenly filled with ideas of messages sent from other worlds or stars.

But at the cottage, he was amazed to find that neither steel knives nor drills nor chisels could make the slightest impression upon this astounding material. It seemed to the eye to be just stiff tan fiber, yet he knew that it was a far different kind of material, as refractory as diamond and as flexibly tough as steel.

It was several hours before he thought of pouring water upon the enigmatic little container. When he did so, the fiber-like stuff instantly softened. It was evident that the material had been designed to withstand the tremendous heat and shock of alighting on another world, but to soften up and open when it fell upon a moist, warm world.

Standifer carefully cut open the softened case. Then he stared, puzzled, at its contents, a frown upon his sensitive face. There was nothing inside the case but two withered-looking brown seeds, each of them about an inch long.

He was disappointed, at first. He had expected writing of some kind, perhaps even a tiny model or machine. But after a while his interest rose again, for it occurred to him that these could be no ordinary seeds which the people of some far planet had tried to sow broadcast upon other worlds.

So he planted the two seeds in a carefully weeded corner of his flower garden, about ten feet apart. And in the days that followed, he scrupulously watered and watched them, and waited eagerly to see what kind of strange plants might spring from them.

His interest was so great, indeed, that he forgot all about his unfinished canvases, the work that had brought him to the seclusion of these quiet hills. Yet he did not tell anyone of his strange find, for he felt that if he did, excited scientists would come and take the seeds away to study and dissect, and he did not want that.

In two weeks he was vastly excited to see the first little shoots of dark green come up through the soil at the places where he had planted the two seeds. They were like stiff little green rods and they did not look very unusual to Standifer. Yet he continued to water them carefully, and to wait tensely for their development.

The two shoots came up fast, after

that. Within a month they had become green pillars almost six feet tall, each of them covered with a tight-wrapped sheath of green sepals. They were a little thicker at the middle than at the top or bottom, and one of them was a little slenderer than the other, and its color a lighter green. Altogether, they looked like no plants ever before seen on earth.

Standifer saw that the sheathing sepals were now beginning to unfold, to curl back from the tops of the plants. He waited almost breathlessly for their further development, and every night before he retired he looked last at the plants, and every morning when he awoke they were his first thought.

Then early one June morning he found that the sepals had curled back enough from the tips to let him see the tops of the true plants inside. And he stood for many minutes there, staring in strange wonder at that which the unfolding of the sepals was beginning to reveal.

For where they had curled back at the tips, they disclosed what looked strangely like the tops of two human heads. It was as though two people were enclosed in those sheathing sepals, two people the hair of whose heads was becoming visible as masses of fine green threads, more animal than plant in appearance.

One looked very much like the top of a girl's head, a mass of fluffy, light-green hair only the upper part of which was visible. The other head was of shorter, coarser and darker green hair, as though it was that of a man.

STANDIFER went through that day in a stupefied daze. He was almost tempted to unfold the sepals further by force, so intense was his curiosity, but he restrained himself and waited. And the next few days brought him further confirmation of his astounding suspicion.

The sepals of both plants had by then unfolded almost completely. And inside one was a green man-plant—and in the other a girl! Their bodies were strangely human in shape, living, breathing bodies of weird, soft, green plant-flesh, with tendril-like arms and tendril limbs too that were still rooted and hidden down in the calyxes. Their heads and faces were very human indeed, with green-pupiled eyes through which they could see.

Standifer stared and stared at the plant girl, for she was beautiful beyond the artist's dreams, her slim green body rising proudly straight from the cup of her calyx. Her shining, green-pupiled eyes saw him as he stood by her, and she raised a tendril-like arm and softly touched him. And her tendrils stirred with a soft rustling that was like a voice speaking to him.

Then Standifer heard a deeper, angry rustling behind him, and turned. It was the man-plant, his big tendril arms reaching furiously to grasp the artist, jealousy and rage in his eyes. Hastily the painter stepped away from him.

In the days that followed, Standifer was like one living in a dream. For he had fallen in love with the shining slim plant girl, and he spent almost all his waking hours sitting in his garden looking into her eyes, listening to the strange rustling that was her speech.

It seemed to his artist's soul that the beauty of no animal-descended earth woman could match the slender grace of this plant girl. He would stand beside her and wish passionately that he could understand her rustling whisper, as her tendrils softly touched and caressed him.

The man-plant hated him, he knew, and would try to strike at him. And the man hated the girl too, in time. He would reach raging tendrils out toward her to clutch her, but was too far separated from her ever to reach her.

Standifer saw that these two strange creatures were still developing, and that their feet would soon come free of their roots. He knew that these were beings of a kind of life utterly unlike anything terrestrial, that they began their life-cycle as seeds and rooted plants, and that they developed then into free and moving plant-people such as were unknown on this world.

He knew too that on whatever far world was their home, creatures like these must have reached a great degree of civilization and science, to send out broadcast into space the seeds that would sow their race upon other planets. But of their distant origin he thought little, as he waited impatiently for the day when his shining plant-girl would be free of her roots.

He felt that that day was very near, and he did not like to leave the garden even for a minute, now. But on one morning Standifer had to leave, to go to the village for necessary supplies; since for two days there had been no food in the cottage and he felt himself growing weak with hunger.

It hurt him to part from the plant girl even for those few hours, and he stood for minutes caressing her fluffy green hair and listening to her happy rustling before he took himself off.

When he returned, he heard as soon as he entered his garden a sound that chilled the blood in his veins. It was the plant girl's voice—a mere agonized whisper that spoke dreadful things. He rushed wildly into the garden and stood a moment aghast at what he saw.

The final development had taken place in his absence. Both creatures had come free of their roots—and the man-plant had in his jealousy and hate broken and torn the shining green body of the girl. She lay, her tendrils stirring feebly, while the other looked down at her in satisfied hate.

Standifer madly seized a scythe and ran across the garden. In two terrific strokes, he cut down the man-plant into a dead thing oozing dark green blood. Then he dropped the weapon and wildly stooped over his dying plant girl.

She looked up at him through pain-filled, wide eyes as her life oozed away. A green tendril arm lifted slowly to touch his face, and he heard a last rustling whisper from this creature whom he had loved and who had loved him across the vast gulf of world-differing species. Then he knew that she was dead.

THAT was long ago, and the garden by the little cottage is weed-grown now and holds no memory of those two strange creatures from the great outside who grew and lived and died there. Standifer does not dwell there any more, but lives far away in the burning, barren Arizona desert. For never, since then, can he bear the sight of green growing things.

# The Anatomy Lesson

By WILLIAM J. MAKIN

*A brief story about a skeleton that grinned, and grinned, and never ceased grinning, as if enjoying a huge joke*

PROFESSOR CARTHEW adjusted his pince-nez. His stooping shoulders, tired sad face, and struggling wisp of gray mustache, seemed pathetically incongruous against the bold, upright skeleton that stood by his side flashing a blatant grin at the assembled class.

Young faces, eager and fresh, grouped themselves before the professor. Pristine notebooks were pressed open at the first page. The chattering undercurrent of lively young men and girls reached the professor.

". . . a simply gorgeous film. I loved it."

". . . watched a perfectly marvelous piece of trephining by Juke and ——"

"Can you manage tea at four o'clock? Oh, do!"

"Ahem!"

Professor Carthew cowed the young people into an indifferent silence. The faces looked up. Pencils and fountain-pens were poised. The afternoon lecture on anatomy was to begin.

"Today I intend to depart from my usual procedure in these lessons," said Professor Carthew, wearily. "On the last occasion when we met I discussed the vertebral column in detail. I dare say several of you found it highly technical. I do not intend to weary you again with such matters."

"The old duffer has a date," sniggered one of the pupils. "Wants to get away!"

"But this afternoon," went on the professor, "I want to discuss the skeleton as a whole, to ask you to deduce, from these bones that stand before you, the sort of fleshy garb that once covered them. In brief, it is the man, not the skeleton, I will tell you about."

Despite the coolness of the afternoon, the students in the leading row noticed with some surprize that the professor's brow was beaded with perspiration. Unusual, in old, dry-as-dust "Bones". Moreover, before he spoke again, Professor Carthew gave a half-fearful glance at the erect, grinning skeleton standing by his side on the raised dais.

"The more literary among you," he went on, "will recall that Hamlet philosophized over the dug-up skull of Yorick, the king's jester. 'A fellow of infinite jest' is how he described the twenty-two bones composing the cranium and face of the thing unearthed."

With a trembling pointer, the professor indicated the skeleton on the stand.

"Here, too, is a fellow of infinite jest —a fool!"

The savage utterance of the words caused several of the students to look up in surprize. One, who was engaged in a crossword puzzle, laid down his pencil.

A strange smile crossed the lecturer's face.

"Perhaps some one among you will tell me what this skeleton suggests?"

His eyes gleamed behind the pince-nez swiveling at the crowd of young faces.

"A best quality specimen, sir," responded one wag. "Probably Austrian

and worth every penny of fifteen guineas."

A snigger went round the lecture room at this boldness. But the smile on the face of Professor Carthew seemed to accept the remark as a compliment.

"A good observation as regards the price, young man," he nodded. "It *is* a best quality specimen, having a movable spine." A jerk of his pointer, and the bones danced. "But you are wrong as to its country of origin. It happens to be an English skeleton."

He seemed to enjoy the surprize on the faces of the students, for he paused with an actor-like love of the drama and poured out for himself a glass of water from the carafe at his desk.

"But, sir," stammered another student, "doesn't that make it rather rare in medical schools? Was the subject a man who donated his body for medical research?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes," murmured the professor. That smile still played beneath the wisp of gray mustache. "In fact, it is not without interest that the subject and myself had a discussion upon skeletons less than a hour before he became available for medical research."

At this, the class of students sat all attention. Notebooks, for once, were ignored.

"A few moments ago I tagged a Shakespearean label on him—'a fellow of infinite jest.' And so he was in a modern, ineffably boring manner. Actually, he was a surgeon—oh, yes, quite well-known—but famous for his fatuous jokes, his absurd stories at which he laughed so much himself, rather than for his skill with the knife. He had the supreme bedside manner. I have even seen some intelligent patients accept the anesthetic gladly when he was in the midst of one of his interminable funny stories. . . ."

EYES gazed from professor to skeleton, and back again. The front-row students noticed that the beads of perspiration had increased, and that the eyes behind the pince-nez gleamed with hatred.

"With his silly jokes and butcher's hands he had blundered into some sort of successful practise. One day a friend, a very dear friend of mine, was wheeled on an operating-table before him. True, the operation was a delicate one, but one which a clever surgeon with a proper knowledge of anatomy could have brought to a successful issue. The lady—the friend—died.

"I was actually on my way to the nursing-home when the dreadful business happened. And I arrived only to gaze upon her quiet, resigned face, so beautiful even in death. . . ."

Professor Carthew's voice had softened. For a moment, tears dimmed his eyes, only to vanish instantly and be replaced by that deep-seated hatred.

"You students are only yet learning the rudiments of dissection and anatomy," he went on. "To your untrained eyes that surgical operation might have appeared a desperate but vain attempt to save life. As a man who has spent years on anatomical study, the operation revealed itself to me as murder—sheer, blundering murder by a fool with a knife."

The voice was now harsh and damning. Each student was transfixed to his desk. In the silence that followed, the loud ticking of the clock seemed emphasized. Even Professor Carthew gave the clock his customary glance to assess the progress in time of his lecture.

"There were two courses open to me," he went on, in a monotone. "One was to indict the surgeon before the General Medical Council, denounce him as an incompetent blunderer and a danger to the

public, and insist that he be struck off the rolls. It would have created a scandal, brought dishonor on a profession for which I have the highest respect and to which I have given the best years of my life. I should have been hated as a meddlesome old fool. Above all, it would have dragged the corpse of that very dear friend into the vulgar scrutiny of scandal. There remained the other course. . . ."

He turned from the class and walked a few steps toward the skeleton. He seemed to be regarding it almost affectionately.

"Without a word, I went away from the nursing-home back to my house in Hampstead. A few of you young people have done me the honor at times to call upon me there. I am always delighted to see you, and give you the benefit of what modicum of knowledge I possess on the infinite subject of human anatomy. Some of you will recall my experimental laboratory, as I proudly call it—the shed at the end of my garden. It was to the laboratory I went after leaving the nursing-home.

"An hour later my preparations were made. I entered my house and telephoned to the surgeon in Wimpole Street. I asked him, in as ordinary tone as I could muster at the moment, to call and see me that evening. He seemed surprized, and uncertain whether he could manage it. I insisted. In fact, I made a few anatomical criticisms of that operation over the telephone. He blustered, but the fact that I had seen the body worried him. He agreed to come. I insisted upon absolute secrecy. He must tell no one where he was going that evening. I would meet him at the Underground station near my house. Frightened at the possibility of my threat, he agreed. . . ."

Professor Carthew turned away from the grinning skull, and drank the glass of water. The tired eyes wavered toward the clock.

"The well-known surgeon arrived—without his bedside manner. No one saw us enter my house. I took care of that.

"When we had seated ourselves, he came straight to the point. He wanted to know what I was going to do. I told him I wanted to talk of anatomy—and skeletons!"

Once again the grim smile.

"Perhaps the students of this class have been surprized on occasions when I appear to have wandered from the subject of my lectures on anatomy. But even the little philosophical reflections are only the result of much study in this fascinating subject. Some of those philosophical reflections I repeated to the surgeon, sitting in my house that evening.

"I pointed out the curious horror that living people have of skeletons; why, I have never been able to understand. Partly, I suppose, it is based on the strange idea that the skeleton is typical of death. But the skeleton is really only man-named. Skeletons have a living, purposeful unity of their own. They can be, as one student pointed out this afternoon, of best quality.

"Actually, of course, man is frightened of the skeleton only because it is a reminder that at the base he is himself shamelessly grotesque. It is this grinning ugliness of bony structure which is hidden by fleshy pomp and pride. Curious that some men should be proud of the flesh and ashamed of the bones. Personally, it is the framework and not the outward show that has always interested me. . . ."

THERE was a gurgle of water as the decanter was brought into play again. Only the professor, with his wavering glance, realized that the clock

gave him less than a quarter of an hour to end his lesson on anatomy. The students might have been skeletons themselves, so rigid did they sit and stare.

"I could see that the surgeon was irritated, puzzled and scared in turn by my talk. But here again, I must ask students to make note of a curious anatomical fact. Whatever expression the fleshy face may register—joy or sorrow, love or hate—you may be certain that the skull itself, those twenty-two bones, are fixed in a hideous grin. As is the subject before you," the professor added in a tone of profound contempt.

"And even as I spoke of my deep love for that dear friend whom his bungling hands and murderous knife had taken from me for ever, I was aware, paradoxically, that both our skulls were grinning at each other. My sorrow left his fleshy face unmoved. Only his eyes were calculating and his disgusting gray matter pondering what action I was going to take. I invited him, casually, to walk across the garden with me and view an anatomical specimen in my laboratory. Wondering a little, but anxious to please, he agreed.

"We passed through the garden and entered the hut. As some of you know, I have several excellent skulls there. I persuaded him to examine one closely—it is a curiously primitive example which I myself dug up from a barrow on Salisbury Plain. I pointed out how even this bronze age skull had undergone two trephining operations, and clever operations they were.

"As he bent closer over the skull, I struck—with a surgeon's knife. I had assessed the position of his heart exactly. It lay, approximately, just here!" The pointer was casually inserted in the skeleton. "In less than a minute that blundering member of our great profession was dead at my feet. Before the morning, working steadily through the night, I had acquired an excellent new specimen of a skeleton for anatomical demonstration to students."

One of the girl students stifled a scream that was rising in her throat. A gasp of horror went round the room. But not a single student dared rise. They were all rooted. Professor Carthew was blinking in tired fashion at the clock.

"Before we close the lesson for the afternoon," he went on in that same dreadful monotone, "there is one final anatomical fact which I must bring to your notice. It concerns the lower limbs, and in particular, the feet of the subject. As I have told you in previous lectures, the foot consists of the tarsus, the metatarsus, and the five free digits or toes. In articulation they carry the weight of the body. They leave a definite mark in wet soil or similar substances.

"It is with this anatomical fact that I will conclude today. I said that a skeleton may be regarded as a living skeleton. It is so in this case, for the surgeon walking across my garden left a definite impress on his feet. A little over an hour ago those footprints were measured by some rather amateur scientists attached to Scotland Yard. They were found to fit, exactly, the shoes of the missing surgeon.

"It appears that one of that curious human species of loafers, men who hang about streets listlessly and apparently half alive, had seen me meet the surgeon at the Underground station. I was known to him; the surgeon he recognized from a photograph that was shown him. I suppose in the ordinary way, a professor of anatomy might be the last person to be suspected of murder. What I have done, however, is to rid the profession of a most undesirable practitioner."

PROFESSOR CARTHEW drained the glass at one gulp. A spasm of pain twitched his features, and he swayed a little. Recovering himself, he gave a half-laugh of apology. He still faced that group of students, apparently oblivious of the horrified gaze that had fixed their young, eager features. He seemed equally oblivious to the opening of the door of the lecture room, and the entry of a powerfully built man with two constables in the rear.

"Marmaduke Arthur Carthew!" began the new entrant. "I am Inspector Rollins of Scotland Yard, and I hold a warrant for your arrest on a charge of wilful murder against——"

But the professor had held up his hand as though he would check some eager student in spate.

"Finally, I would say that it is my sincere wish—I have stated it in my will—that my own body be used for dissection purposes, and that my skeleton be used for anatomy lessons by my successor. But please do not forget, dear students, that however much my face may seem to gleam with somber vanity or vulgar vengeance, the skull beneath is laughing for ever."

And with an exuding sigh he crumpled suddenly at the bony feet of the subject he had lectured upon. His hand still clutched the glass, from which came a faint aroma of almonds.

The anatomy lesson was ended.


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# The Picture in the House*

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

SEARCHERS after horror haunt strange, far places. For them are the catacombs of Ptolemais, and the carven mausolea of the nightmare countries. They climb to the moonlit towers of ruined Rhine castles, and falter down black, cobwebbed steps beneath the scattered stones of forgotten cities in Asia. The haunted wood and the desolate mountain are their shrines, and they linger around the sinister monoliths on uninhabited islands. But the true epicure in the terrible, to whom a new thrill of unutterable ghastliness is the chief end and justification of existence, esteems most of all the ancient, lonely farmhouses of backwoods New England; for there the dark elements of strength, solitude, grotesqueness and ignorance combine to form the perfection of the hideous.

Most horrible of all sights are the little unpainted wooden houses remote from traveled ways, usually squatted upon some damp, grassy slope or leaning against some gigantic, outcropping rock. Two hundred years and more they have leaned or squatted there, while the vines have crawled and the trees have swelled and spread. They are almost hidden now in lawless luxuriances of green and guardian shrouds of shadow; but the small-paned windows still stare shockingly, as if blinking through a lethal stupor which wards off madness by dulling the memory of unutterable things.

In such houses have dwelt generations of strange people, whose like the world has never seen. Seized with a gloomy and fanatical belief which exiled them from their kind, their ancestors sought the wilderness for freedom. There the scions of a conquering race indeed flourished, free from the restrictions of their fellows, but cowered in an appalling slavery to the dismal phantasms of their own minds.

Divorced from the enlightenment of civilization, the strength of these Puritans turned into singular channels; and in their isolation, morbid self-repression, and struggle for life with relentless Nature, there came to them dark, furtive traits from the prehistoric depths of their cold Northern heritage. By necessity practical and by philosophy stern, these folk were not beautiful in their sins. Erring as all mortals must, they were forced by their rigid code to seek conceal-

* From WEIRD TALES for January, 1924.

ment above all else; so that they came to use less and less taste in what they concealed. Only the silent, sleepy, staring houses in the backwoods can tell all that has lain hidden since the early days; and they are not communicative, being loath to shake off the drowsiness which helps them forget. Sometimes one feels that it would be merciful to tear down these houses, for they must often dream.

It was to a time-battered edifice of this description that I was driven one afternoon in November, 1896, by a rain of such chilling copiousness that any shelter was preferable to exposure. I had been traveling for some time amongst the people of the Miskatonic Valley in quest of certain genealogical data; and from the remote, devious, and problematical nature of my course, had deemed it convenient to employ a bicycle despite the lateness of the season. Now I found myself upon an apparently abandoned road which I had chosen as the shortest cut to Arkham; overtaken by the storm at a point far from any town, and confronted with no refuge save the antique and repellent wooden building which blinked with bleared windows from between two huge, leafless oaks near the foot of a rocky hill.

Distant though it was from the remnant of a road, this house none the less impressed me unfavorably the very moment I espied it. Honest, wholesome structures do not stare at travelers so slyly and hauntingly, and in my genealogical researches I had encountered legends of a century before which biased me against places of this kind. Yet the force of the elements was such as to overcome my scruples, and I did not hesitate to wheel my machine up the weedy rise to the


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closed door which seemed at once so suggestive and secretive.

I HAD somehow taken it for granted that the house was abandoned, yet as I approached it I was not so sure; for though the walks were indeed overgrown with weeds, they seemed to retain their nature a little too well to argue complete desertion. Therefore, instead of trying the door, I knocked, feeling as I did so a trepidation I could scarcely explain.

As I waited on the rough, mossy rock which served as a door-step, I glanced at the neighboring windows and the panes of the transom above me, and noticed that although old, rattling, and almost opaque with dirt, they were not broken. The building, then, must still be inhabited, despite its isolation and general neglect.

However, my rapping evoked no response; so after repeating the summons I tried the rusty latch and found the door unfastened. Inside was a little vestibule with walls from which the plaster was falling, and through the doorway came a faint but peculiarly hateful odor. I entered, carrying my bicycle, and closed the door behind me. Ahead rose a narrow staircase, flanked by a small door probably leading to the cellar, while to the left and right were closed doors leading to rooms on the ground floor.

Leaning my bicycle against the wall, I opened the door at the left, and crossed into a small, low-ceiled chamber but dimly lighted by its two dusty windows and furnished in the barest and most primitive possible way. It appeared to be a kind of sitting-room, for it had a table and several chairs, and an immense fireplace above which ticked an antique clock on a mantel. Books and papers were very few, and in the prevailing gloom I could not readily discern the titles. What interested me was the uniform air of archaism as displayed in every visible detail. Most of the houses in this region I had found rich in relics of the past, but here the antiquity was curiously complete; for in all the room I could not discover a single article of definitely post-Revolutionary date. Had the furnishings been less humble, the place would have been a collector's paradise.

As I surveyed this quaint apartment, I felt an increase in that aversion first excited by the bleak exterior of the house. Just what it was that I feared or loathed, I could by no means define; but something in the whole atmosphere seemed redolent of unhallowed age, of unpleasant crudeness, and of secrets which should be forgotten.

I felt disinclined to sit down, and wandered about, examining the various articles which I had noticed. The first object of my curiosity was a book of medium size lying upon the table and presenting such an antediluvian aspect that I marveled at beholding it outside a museum or library. It was bound in leather with metal fittings, and was in an excellent state of preservation, being altogether an unusual sort of volume to encounter in an abode so lowly. When I opened it to the title-page my wonder grew even greater, for it proved to be nothing less rare than Pigafetta's account of the Congo region, written in Latin from the notes of the sailor Lopez and printed at Frankfort in 1598. I had often heard of this work, with its curious illustrations by the brothers De Bry, hence for a moment forgot my uneasiness in my desire to turn the pages before me. The engravings were indeed interesting, drawn wholly from imagination and careless descriptions, and representing Negroes with white skins and Caucasian features; nor would I soon have closed the book had not an exceedingly trivial cir-

cumstance upset my tired nerves and revived my sensation of disquiet.

What annoyed me was merely the persistent way in which the volume tended to fall open of itself at Plate XII, which represented in gruesome detail a butcher's shop of the cannibal Anziques. I experienced some shame at my susceptibility to so slight a thing, but the drawing nevertheless disturbed me, especially in connection with some adjacent passages descriptive of Anzique gastronomy.

I had turned to a neighboring shelf and was examining its meager literary contents—an Eighteenth Century Bible, a *Pilgrim's Progress* of like period, illustrated with grotesque wood-cuts and printed by the almanac-maker Isaiah Thomas, the rotting bulk of Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, and a few other books of evidently equal age—when my attention was aroused by the unmistakable sound of walking in the room overhead.

At first astonished and startled, considering the lack of response to my recent knocking at the door, I immediately afterward concluded that the walker had just awaked from a sound sleep; and listened with less surprize as the footsteps sounded on the creaking stairs. The tread was heavy, yet seemed to contain a curious quality of cautiousness; a quality which I disliked the more because the tread was heavy.

When I had entered the room I had shut the door behind me. Now, after a moment of silence during which the walker may have been inspecting my bicycle in the hall, I heard a fumbling at the latch and saw the paneled portal swing open again.

IN THE doorway stood a person of such singular appearance that I should have exclaimed aloud but for the restraints of

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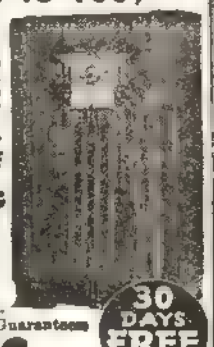

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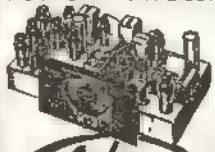

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good breeding. Old, white-bearded, and ragged, my host possessed a countenance and physique which inspired equal wonder and respect. His height could not have been less than six feet, and despite a general air of age and poverty he was stout and powerful in proportion.

His face, almost hidden by a long beard which grew high on the cheeks, seemed abnormally ruddy and less wrinkled than one might expect; while over a high forehead fell a shock of white hair little thinned by the years. His blue eyes, though a trifle bloodshot, seemed inexplicably keen and burning. But for his horrible unkemptness, the man would have been as distinguished-looking as he was impressive. This unkemptness, however, made him offensive despite his face and figure. Of what his clothing consisted I could hardly tell, for it seemed to me no more than a mass of tatters surmounting a pair of high, heavy boots; and his lack of cleanliness surpassed description.

The appearance of this man, and the instinctive fear he inspired, prepared me for something like enmity; so that I almost shuddered through surprize and a sense of uncanny incongruity when he motioned me to a chair and addressed me in a thin, weak voice full of fawning respect and ingratiating hospitality. His speech was very curious, an extreme form of Yankee dialect I had thought long extinct; and I studied it closely as he sat down opposite me for conversation.

"Ketched in the rain, be ye?" he greeted, "glad ye was nigh the haouse en' hed the sense ta come right in. I calc'late I was asleep, else I'd a heared ye—I ain't as young as I uster be, an' I need a paowerful sight o' naps naowadays. Trav'lin' fur? I hain't seed many folks 'long this rud sence they tuk off the Arkham stage."

I replied that I was going to Arkham, and apologized for my rude entry into his domicile, whereupon he continued:

"Glad ta see ye, young sir—new faces is scurce arount here, an' I hain't got much ta cheer me up these days. Guess yew hail from Bosting, don't ye? I never ben thar, but I kin tell a taown man when I see 'im — we hed one fer deestrick schoolmaster in 'eighty-four, but he quit suddent an' no one never heared on 'im sence——"

Here the old man lapsed into a kind of chuckle, and made no explanation when I questioned him. He seemed to be in an aboundingly good humor, yet to possess those eccentricities which one might guess from his grooming. For some time he rambled on with an almost feverish geniality, when it struck me to ask him how he came by so rare a book as Pigafetta's *Regnum Congo*. The effect of this volume had not left me, and I felt a certain hesitancy in speaking of it; but curiosity overmastered all the vague fears which had steadily accumulated since my first glimpse of the house. To my relief, the question did not seem an awkward one; for the old man answered freely and volubly.

"Oh, thet Afriky book? Cap'n Ebenezer Holt traded me thet in 'sixty-eight—him as was kilt in the war."

Something about the name of Ebenezer Holt caused me to look up sharply. I had encountered it in my genealogical work, but not in any record since the Revolution. I wondered if my host could help me in the task at which I was laboring, and resolved to ask him about it later on. He continued:

"Ebenezer was on a Salem merchantman fer years, an' picked up a sight o' queer stuff in every port. He got this in London, I guess—he uster like ter buy things at the shops. I was up ta his haouse onct, on the hill, tradin' hosses, when I see this book. I relished the pic-

ters, so he give it in on a swap. 'Tis a queer book—here, leave me git on my spe'tacles——"

The old man fumbled among his rags, producing a pair of dirty and amazingly antique glasses with small octagonal lenses and steel bows. Donning these, he reached for the volume on the table and turned the pages lovingly.

"EBENEZER cud read a leetle o' this—'tis Latin—but I can't. I hed two er three schoolmasters read me a bit, an' Passon Clark, him they say got draownded in the pond—kin yew make anything outen it?"

I told him that I could, and translated for his benefit a paragraph near the beginning. If I erred, he was not scholar enough to correct me; for he seemed childishly pleased at my English version. His proximity was becoming rather obnoxious, yet I saw no way to escape without offending him. I was amused at the childish fondness of this ignorant old man for the pictures in a book he could not read, and wondered how much better he could read the few books in English which adorned the room. This revelation of simplicity removed much of the ill-defined apprehension I had felt, and I smiled as my host rambled on:

"Queer haow picters kin set a body thinkin'. Take this un here near the front. Hev yew ever seed trees like thet, with big leaves a-floppin' over an' daown? And them men—them can't be niggers—they dew beat all! Kinder like Injuns, I guess, even ef they be in Afriky. Some o' these here critters looks like monkeys, or half monkeys an' half men, but I never heared o' nothin' like this un." Here he pointed to a fabulous creature of the artist, which one might describe as a sort of dragon with the head of an alligator.

"But naow I'll show ye the best un—


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over here nigh the middle——" The old man's speech grew a trifle thicker and his eyes assumed a brighter glow, but his fumbling hands, though seemingly clumsier than before, were entirely adequate to their mission. The book fell open, almost of its own accord and as if from frequent consultation at this place, to the repellent twelfth plate showing a butcher's shop amongst the Anzique cannibals. My sense of restlessness returned, though I did not exhibit it. The especially bizarre thing was that the artist made his Africans look like white men—the limbs and quarters hanging about the walls of the shop were ghastly, while the butcher with his ax was hideously incongruous. But my host seemed to relish the view as much as I disliked it.

"What d'ye think o' this—ain't never see the like hereabouts, eh? When I see this I telled Eb Holt, 'That's suthin' ta stir ye up an' make yer blood tickle!' When I read in Scripter about slayin'—like them Midianites was slew—I kinder think things, but I ain't got a picter of it. Here a body kin see all they is to it—I s'pose 'tis sinful, but ain't we all born an' livin' in sin? Thet feller bein' chopped up gives me a tickle every time I look at 'im—I hev ta keep lookin' at 'im—see whar the butcher cut off his feet? Thar's his head on thet bench, with one arm side of it, an' t'other arm's on the graound side o' the meat-block."

As the man mumbled on in his shocking ecstasy the expression on his hairy, spectacled face became indescribable, but his voice sank rather than mounted. My own sensations can scarcely be recorded. All the terror I had dimly felt before rushed upon me actively and vividly, and I knew that I loathed the ancient and abhorrent creature so near me with an infinite intensity. His madness, or at least his partial perversion, seemed beyond dispute. He was almost whispering now, with a huskiness more terrible than a scream, and I trembled as I listened.

"As I says, 'tis queer haow picters sets ye thinkin'. D'ye know, young sir, I'm right sot on this un here. Arter I got the book off Eb I uster look at it a lot, especial when I'd heared Passon Clark rant o' Sundays in his big wig. Onct I tried suthin' funny—here, young sir, don't git skeert—all I done was ter look at the picter afore I kilt the sheep for market—killin' sheep was kinder more fun arter lookin' at it——"

The tone of the old man now sank very low, sometimes becoming so faint that his words were hardly audible. I listened to the rain, and to the rattling of the bleared, small-paned windows, and marked a rumbling of approaching thunder quite unusual for the season. Once a terrific flash and peal shook the frail house to its foundations, but the whisperer seemed not to notice it.

"Killin' sheep was kinder more fun—but d'ye know, 'twan't quite *satisfyin'*. Queer haow a *cravin'* gits a holt on ye—as ye love the Almighty, young man, don't tell nobody, but I swar ter Gawd thet picter begun ta make me *hungry fer victuals I couldn't raise nor buy*—here, set still, what's ailin' ye?—I didn't do nothin', only I wondered haow 'twud be ef I *did*—they say meat makes blood an' flesh, an' gives ye new life, so I wondered ef 'twudn't make a man live longer an' longer ef 'twas *more the same*——"

But the whisperer never continued. The interruption was not due to my fright, nor to the rapidly increasing storm amidst whose fury I was presently to open my eyes on a smoky solitude of blackened ruins. It was due to a very simple though somewhat unusual happening.

The open book lay flat between us,

with the picture staring repulsively upward. As the old man whispered the words *"more the same"* a tiny spattering impact was heard, and something showed on the yellowed paper of the upturned volume. I thought of the rain and of a leaky roof, but rain is not red. On the butcher's shop of the Anzique cannibals a small red spattering glistened picturesquely, lending vividness to the horror of the engraving. The old man saw it, and stopped whispering even before my expression of horror made it necessary; saw it and glanced quickly toward the floor of the room he had left an hour before. I followed his glance, and beheld just above us on the loose plaster of the ancient ceiling a large irregular spot of wet crimson which seemed to spread even as I viewed it. I did not shriek or move, but merely shut my eyes.

A moment later came the titanic thunderbolt of thunderbolts, striking the accursed house of unutterable secrets and bringing the oblivion which alone saved my mind.

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### Kobold's Keep

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "*The Headless Miller of Kobold's Keep* is an exceptionally good yarn, nicely told. A weird tale such as that one appears just about once in a 'Blue Moon'! It brings back poignant memories of the 'good old days' of WEIRD TALES' youth when the magazine really was *weird*. Who is this man Garnet, anyway, and where has he been hiding all these years? In my humble opinion he is a real find. I, for one, sincerely hope to find him in your pages often. His tale takes first place in the January issue. H. P. Lovecraft comes just about half a step behind with his *The Thing on the Door-Step*. I have yet to read a poor Lovecraft story. Now that he has returned to your pages, keep him there. You can't go wrong on a Lovecraft yarn. Another fine piece of work was *Fate Weaves a Web*, by Alfred I. Tooke, a decidedly different story, well worked out. That little fantasy of Kuttner's, *The Eater of Souls*, is likewise well worth mentioning. Why not do an interplanetary novelette for us, Henry? I really believe you could give us the 'goods.' Other good stories included that excellent reprint *The Eighth Green Man*, and *The Disinterment*, although the latter was a little too verbose. . . . Nominations for reprints: *Bimini, The Girl from Samarcand, The Arctic Death, The Space Eaters, Night-Thing, The Man with a Thousand Legs* and *The Golden Whistle*."

### Howard's Complete Works

Ted Phillips, of Fleetville, Pennsylvania, writes: "In regard to the late Robert E. Howard: I admire Mr. Howard's writing very much. In his own particular line I believe him without an equal in the English language. I was particularly interested in his poetry. The verses of his own which were used as chapter heads are most outstanding. He told me, however, that most of these were only separate bits, not written in complete form. Do you think it at all likely that any complete collection of Howard's stories will ever be published, or if his poetry could be collected and arranged for publication? The verses and maps should make an interesting volume by themselves. Looking at his up-hill signature before me, it is strange and sad to think that he will write no more." [We understand that Mr. Howard's agent is trying to arrange with a book publisher for the publication of his works. We shall inform our readers through the Eyrie if he succeeds.—THE EDITOR.]

### On Virgil Finlay's Art

Charles Bulloch, of Durham, North Carolina, writes: "The four best artists WT has ever had are Hugh Rankin, Joseph Doolin, J. Allen St. John and Virgil Finlay. Finlay, after a slightly experimental start, when he was feeling out the magazine, readers, stories, editors and field itself, has rapidly improved and developed, and he has now definitely established himself in the top position of all illustrators who have ever appeared in

this magazine. His work is so lovely that it is thrillingly breath-taking just to look at, and compels your attention for some time. He has done the most truly exciting pictures ever to appear in WT. His aptitude for imparting exactly the proper atmosphere for drawing the scene as it is described, and his fine figure work, make him outstanding. We finally have someone who neither distorts anatomy, nor draws from guesses or imagination. His figures are more nearly correct and complete anatomically than any of the other artists' have ever been, though he still omits certain features. His nudes, both front and rear views, are absolutely delightful, setting your brain on fire. If his forthcoming cover is as good as we all expect it to be, let him do many more. And please give us some male nudes, for I'm sure I'm not the only one who likes to look at the body beautiful of both sexes. So far, he's given us only about three fragmentary glimpses of masculine physique unhampered by disfiguring clothing. . . . Finlay's illustrations for *Witch-House, Out of the Sun* and *Children of the Bat* were exquisite, and all his other drawings this month were equally good. He is as fine on horror (*The Headless Miller of Kobold's Keep* and *The Thing on the Door-Step*) as on beauty. . . . *Children of the Bat* was the least weird yarn of Jules de Grandin I've ever read, but good travel-adventure just the same. Too bad La Murcielaga didn't have Jules and friend Trowbridge stripped also, so we could see if the mercurial little Frenchman is as debonair and nonchalant without the benefit of his ever immaculate dress which seems to be a sort of refuge or sanctuary. . . . Congratulations on the more modern attitude you've taken in modifying and lessening some former editorial taboos on stories. Keep it up and proceed further along this line, and abolish others."

### Here She Is

Gertrude Hemken, of Chicago, writes in part: "Mr. Lovecraft really got me with *The Thing on the Door-Step*. I saved it for the last—not only for the reason that I always save the best for the last, but I felt I would actually get the willies if I read it last nite alone at home. (You can expand your chest one inch for that, Mr. H. P., only once before did I get the wim-wams—when I saw the flicker *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*). . . . My my my—Henry Kuttner gave us a short


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one this time—not so sweet—but oh—how wonderfully awful! You suit my taste, Mr. K., and I'm glad you stayed away from rats—just for a change. . . . Guess I'll cackle with the dread guests in *The House on Fifth Avenue.* It was an unusual tale to me—the two sweetie-pies having the same dream—or was it? And that is the unanswered question. Well—well—well—*The Eighth Green Man*—gosh oh gee—also unusual. Mm—I know not what to say—Why didn't the French Arab strive to annihilate the fat proprietor? The whole thing had me guessing—with eyes open that wide—it's bewildering in its strangeness. Any more reprints like that are more than welcome. . . . May I put in my vote for Robert E. Howard's works in book form? Poems and stories. I promise to buy—when I have the money. Horrors! Robert A. Madle makes me weep—ending sentences with prepositions! Tell me, does he split infinitives, too? Tsk tsk. . . . Gawsh—doesn't Jack Darrow ever do anything but read magazines and write comments and belong to clubs and have countless correspondents? Course if he can hold down a job and do all those things, I give him credit for being better than I. No kiddin'—the inactivity would bore me to sobbing gulps. From readers' unsolicited votes it seems that Dorothy Quick is an up and coming authoress. Well—as long as she writes those sweetly bitter Middle Ages tales, I'll cast a vote in her direction, too. P. S.—Why does Mrs. Brundage draw such large eyes on her fair maidens?"

### A Few Comments

J. R. Delt, of Vâncouver Barracks, Washington, writes: "Just a few comments. First, Robert E. Howard, and last, Robert E. Howard. The finest blend of romance, mystery, adventure and—well, just everything. Some day, I (with, I hope, countless other WT readers) will have the pleasure of purchasing a bound volume of Howard's stories. The return of Lovecraft is a most welcome addition. That man is a student in terror. Try to persuade Virgil Finlay to do some covers. The drawing to illustrate *The Woman at Loon Point* was quite the best yet. Above all, keep the magazine weird, uncanny, ghastly—the more so, the better. Try to reprint some of the earliest Lovecraft tales, such as *The Dunwich Horror,* or *The Whisperer in Darkness.* Another fine reprint would be Robert Hichens' *How Love Came to Professor Gildes.* I consider this the finest tale of its kind ever written. Thorp McClusky is a man to watch."

### A Fresh Viewpoint

Donald Allgeier, of Springfield, Missouri, writes: "I got the January WT yesterday and it looked so interesting that I read it right through. It is a fine number. The best story is *The Woman in Room 607.* McClusky is a real find. Close behind this startling and unusual tale come *Fate Weaves a Web* and *Children of the Bat.* Tooke's story is a masterpiece of ingenuity and originality. Quinn used a rather trite climax but delivered a swell yarn. It's good to see de Grandin appearing more regularly. Pendarves' reprint is a splendid and gripping tale. I've been wanting to read it and I'm delighted with it. Pendarves is writing too few stories these days. *The Dead Moan Low* was an excellent story and well written. However, it is marred by an attempt at a matter-of-fact ending—yet an attempt so vague as to really explain nothing. Lovecraft's latest is the best of his more recent works. *The Headless Miller* was a thought-provoking tale and well done. The ultra-shorts are all good. Horner's is the best of the three. Brundage is back with a beautiful cover. However, it doesn't follow the story so closely as it might. For example, why not show the spikes instead of substituting cords? Finlay does nearly all of the interior work this time and does a splendid job. I'm anxious to see him on next month's cover. I'm strongly opposed to your new policy of all stories complete. Since I've been reading your magazine I've found very few of your novels that were not splendid tales. Many of your best stories were serials. Surely you won't deprive us of such reading-matter as *The Devil's Bride, Tam, Son of the Tiger, The Wolf-Leader, Golden Blood, The Hour of the Dragon,* etc. The December issue wasn't quite so good as January. St. John's cover was weird but not very well-proportioned. . . . Virgil Finlay is splendid in his depiction of the nude woman in *Out of the Sun* and of the werewolf in *The Woman at Loon Point.* . . . This has been a fine year for WEIRD TALES. Some splendid new authors have come to fore and one great master has passed on. Of your crop of new writers I am especially interested in Thorp McClusky,

Henry Kuttner, Manly Wade Wellman, and Robert Bloch. And—oh yes—Earl Peirce, Jr. I believe these are new writers and not merely new pseudonyms for established writers. At any rate they seem to me to bring a fresh viewpoint to weird fiction and to inject new blood into it. I believe they'll go a long way. May 1937 be WT's greatest year."

### Amateur Story Contest

Henry S. Hillers, of New York City, writes: "Just another old WT reader with his first letter. . . . Why not have an amateur WEIRD TALES story contest each month? The winner to be selected by yourself and let the prize consist of paying regular rates to the winner as you do the professional writers. I do not believe your constant readers consider WT just another pulp fiction magazine, but look at it as a medium that fills an important place in their lives, and that they are a very serious group with a high degree of worldly intelligence. I would appreciate hearing what your other readers think of the above."

### Ye Olde Horride Monthlie

Robert Bloch writes from Milwaukee: "Just got the new WT and it's a honey. Every once in a while when I get the jaded feeling that I've 'seen everything there is to see in that line,' along comes a particular issue of WEIRD that lops nine years off my life, so that once again I'm the ten-year-old brat that stood in the Northwestern Depot with his first copy of the old magazine, shivering with delight. The present issue is the tops—Virgil's illustrations are absolutely peerless, Lovecraft, Quinn and Ernst are all in their old superb form, Kuttner comes through with an exquisite Dunsanian bit, and Duane W. Rimel makes a bow worthy of several encores. McClusky, Tooke and Garnet represent the newcomers in a way that augurs well for the future material of Ye Olde Horride Monthlie."

### Start of a Battle?

Fred C. Miles, of New Providence, New Jersey, writes: "My favorite story in the January number of WEIRD TALES was the master's tale: *The Thing on the Door-Step.* There is no doubt about Lovecraft being omnipotent in the field of weird fiction. With his ubiquitous *Necronomicon* he always creates a *tour de force* of complete and devastating horror. I have but a single com-


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plaint concerning H. P.'s usage of Abdul Alhazred's name. The adjective he invariably uses to describe the infamous Arab is 'mad.' There are many, many other words with the same meaning (and Mr. Lovecraft's vocabulary is certainly extensive enough), that he might use. G. Garnet's tale (the second best for January), *The Headless Miller of Kobold's Keep,* irritated me slightly. I know that there will be many sneers and cat-calls released in my direction when I say that his use of the old inbreeding bogey went against my grain. However, Garnet did not employ the inbreeding for any particular theme of horror. I, as a veteran reader of weird fiction, am quite inured to the use of vampires, elementals, djinns, and all the paraphernalia of this particular field of fiction. To the best of my knowledge science has never actually disproved the existence of those entities; but inbreeding *has* been shown to have *no* deleterious effects if the stock is wholesome to begin with. Perhaps this will start a great battle in the Eyrie, but I am prepared to stick to my guns. Even as I type this, friends are laughingly saying 'What! A reader of WEIRD TALES objecting to unscientific statements in its pages? Anomaly of anomalies!' Margaret Brundage's cover was very beautiful. The black story titles and blurbs did not detract from its wonderful coloring at all. The news that Virgil Finlay is to paint February's cover leaves me anxiously waiting for the first of January. His two best illustrations in this number are those for *Children of the Bat* and H. P. Lovecraft's story. The latter is really marvelous. A word about last month's reprint. It is not actually very weird, but, nevertheless, one of the very best fantastic stories in the world's literature. Honoré de Balzac would have been honored to see his tale in the magazine. If you do reprint weird poetry, act upon Miss Easton's suggestion and give us Poe's *Ulalume.* I consider it Poe's greatest poem. A fine piece of music."

### That Bored Look

Henry Kuttner, of Beverly Hills, California, writes: "The January issue was notable for three remarkable stories: Lovecraft's admirable yarn, the most literate in the issue; Pendarves' unusual *Eighth Green Man,* which I've been hoping you'd reprint; and Garnet's striking *Kobold's Keep.* Congrats to Finlay, too, on the illustrations for the Quinn and Lovecraft stories. And a word for Rimel's *Disinterment,* which I thought very well done—strong in style and atmosphere and horror. But what makes the crucified gal on the cover look so bored?"

### Brundage's Naked Best

Johnnie MacDonald, of Martinsburg, West Virginia, writes: "The January issue was mildly superb. What with Lovecraft's latest rhapsody in black, Quinn's eery tale of bats and bubble-dancers and the added superior content, WT makes a decided hit. Brundage's cover illustration is at its usual naked best, which is top-hole. But I rather think Mrs. Brundage's oils are thickening, or she is seeking a new medium of expression or something. For, good as her fantastic flourishes remain, she has never quite reached the peak she achieved two or three years ago in illustrating two of Robert E. Howard's incomparable Conan epics; those in mind being *Black Colossus* and *The Slithering Shadow.* One picture used a jade background, the other an ebony. The gorgeous damozels dominating the scene were positive perfection. I have a clear, breath-taking image of these scenes in my mind's eye even still, and would match the daring imagery and execution of this set of pastels against the rarest of Titian Venuses. In closing let me express my appreciation of Alfred I. Tooke's extremely clever story, *Fate Weaves a Web.* It was different."

### He Wants Serials

Jack Johnson, of Philadelphia, writes: "The best story in the January issue is Lovecraft's eery yarn, *The Thing on the Door-Step.* It certainly is the weirdest tale in this issue. McClusky is certainly improving; *The Woman in Room 607* is about the best he's ever written. *Fate Weaves a Web* was just as its forecast stated—'an odd and curious story.' For action, thrills, and suspense, Quinn's story, *Children of the Bat,* ranks first; but, for a weird tale—ugh! I most heartily disagree with John V. Baltadonis on his opinion of serials. Darrow voices my sentiments precisely. Am glad that you reprinted *The Eighth Green Man.* It's one neat story. Until next issue, *au revoir.*"

### For Serial Stories

E. M. Stubbs, of Detroit, writes: "The January issue was excellent. However, you

are making a big mistake by eliminating serials. Your best stories have always been your serials. I think it would be a good idea to have small type in the reprint department. Thus you could have longer stories."

### Conan the Barbarian

Robert Locke, of Kansas City, Missouri, writes: "It is seldom that one writer will become enthralled by a fellow scribe's creation. Yet Conan, the character created by the late Robert E. Howard, so captured my imagination that shortly before his creator's untimely death, I wrote a letter to him expressing my admiration. The letter which Mr. Howard wrote me is one of my most prized possessions. In it he stated his appreciation for my interest and promised that he would write many more stories, carrying Conan through the mythical countries of Khitai, Khosala, Brythunia, Corinthia, etc. . . . Conan was perhaps the realest character that WEIRD TALES has presented, despite the shadowy substance of the lands through which he roamed. Conan lived, breathed, loved, fought with the sweat of his arms and blood from his wounds, felt hate, revenge, disgust, wonder, and a myriad of other emotions that are experienced by human beings. Conan's world was Robert E. Howard's idealization of the Golden Age. He had the ichor of the Gods in his veins, that young man. He created a dream-world such as Heine, Maeterlinck, Dunsany, or Poe did before him, a world peopled with chivalry, knights, magic, and wizards, star-spiraled cities, and gorgeous armies. Intrigue, mystery, adventure, wonder, all filled the pages of his stories, and once again the reader felt surge through him a sudden remembrance of the glamorous days of old. Perhaps if you have read Dante Gabriel Rossetti's gem, *Sudden Light,* you may remember that sudden nostalgic feeling expressed there. I do not know where Mr. Howard got the inspiration for his stories, but it does not matter. He was interested in anthropology and knew a great deal about early Irish folklore and about Britain's early history. He had a masterly command of words and a thorough knowledge of early warfare. But most important of all, he was gifted with imagination and could write of coasts of illusion and isles of enchantment. Conan should not die because of his creator's death. He was too exuberant with life to


*NEXT MONTH*

# Symphony of the Damned

*By* J. R. SPEER

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ever die. Gusty as the wind, whip-keen as a tiger, afraid of neither god, man, nor devil, he was a matchless barbarian. From Cimmeria, a gray land of rolling hills, people with moody inhabitants, he came to the cities of the South because the gloomy ways of his brethren were little to his liking. He was in love with life. Whoever has read that magnificent story, *Black Colossus,* will never forget it—how on a dark, stormy night in troubled Khoraja, Natala, beautiful princess, went forth into the streets of the city to give her kingdom into the hands of the first man she met, and how a barbarian soldier of fortune saved the Hyborian nations from an onslaught of hideous powers that had lain in the dust of the tomb three thousand years ago. . . . Despite Mr. Howard's death, Conan should be given another chance at life. I do not know who of weird-fiction authors to recommend for the task. Clark Ashton Smith and H. P. Lovecraft possess the same type of visionary mind, but their style seems to lack the fire of Howard's. Smith is too compact in his writing, with little emphasis on conversation or action, and Lovecraft writes slowly, directing attention to the mood he is sustaining. C. L. Moore could do it, and possibly Ernst, Hamilton, or E. Hoffmann Price. Who knows, it might even be a newcomer who could most closely approach Howard's style. . . . If you intend to resurrect that doughty barbarian, please let me be one of the first to hear the good news. And as for plots, there are many hints in the stories themselves of Conan's past life that would resolve themselves into great history. As inchoate as his time and land is, it is possible to introduce any sort of atmosphere conducive to a rousing good story. So until Conan once more is fighting monsters and rescuing fair damsels in distress, I want to thank you for the excellent job of editing you have been doing and ask you to keep it up." [As we wrote once before, we consider Mr. Howard's style so distinctively original that it would be impossible for any other writer to recapture that peculiarly Howardesque essence that made the Conan stories so peculiarly his own. Therefore we shall not assign Conan to other hands.—THE EDITOR.]

### Your Favorite Stories

Readers, let us know which story you like best in this issue of WEIRD TALES. Write a letter to the Eyrie, or fill out the coupon at the bottom of this page and send it in. The most popular story in our January issue, as shown by your votes and letters to the Eyrie, was H. P. Lovecraft's masterpiece of eery horror, *The Thing on the Door-Step.* This was pressed for first place by Seabury Quinn's Jules de Grandin story, *Children of the Bat.*

**MY FAVORITE STORIES IN THE MARCH WEIRD TALES ARE:**

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W. T.—8

# COMING NEXT MONTH

AT THE roadside, dangling their brown legs from a bridge, two young boys were fishing in the stream below. They turned together when they heard the purr of Richard's Duesenberg, their eyes wide at the sight of it. It was mere surprize, at first, to see this sleek car arise as though from nowhere. But when Richard waved to them, one of them nearly fell backward over the bridge, and there was a cry of terror on his lips. They dropped their poles, and as though the devil were after them, fled across the fields.

"How strange!" Judith said. "What on earth could have frightened them?"

Richard's lips were tight and he said nothing, but Judith saw his knuckles go white around the steering-wheel.

Then when the silence grew heavy, he turned to her. "These people are awfully rustic, Judy. Don't be bothered by anything they say or do. They may act a little —queer."

They drove into the village, past open stores and markets, past a blacksmith's and a school, past a little church and rows of dilapidated houses. In front of one store was a knot of men, and as the car went by they looked up, their faces hard with hatred. One of them cried out a curse in Spanish and wrung his fist. Others spat contemptuously to the road, others stared at Judith with astounded eyes. . . .

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An eery story of an animal-trainer in a circus—of nine ravening leopards and a weird black panther that chose its time for vengeance.

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What was the thing that moved and writhed on Simon Maglore's back?—a tale of stark horror.

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